

## Harry Potter/Granger and the Chamber of Secrets

### Chapter 1 – There's a House-Elf on the Table

As Harry studied the album currently lying in his lap, he couldn't stop himself from smiling slightly at the pictures spread out before him. Images or not, they really did help him feel... connected... to his parents in a way that he'd never really felt before.

OK, so admittedly the fact that they could move about did help him feel a *bit* closer to the subjects than he might have felt otherwise, but he wasn't going to let minor details like that get in the way of things.

Ever since he'd come back from Hogwarts, after he and Hermione had completed their homework, there hadn't been much more for them to do other than go over their work and study the album he now held in his hands, Alan and Jane having grounded them for their idiocy in going up against a powerful Dark Wizard and into terrible danger on their own (Something Harry had definitely *not* pictured himself being grounded for in all his life). Admittedly, they understood that their children hadn't had much choice at the time- Jane was writing a stern letter of complaint to Professor McGonagall for not believing the three of them when they'd told her about their theory- but the punishment nevertheless remained. They'd been allowed to attend to their homework, of course- both their parents were all in favour of them continuing their education- but with both of them working on it together, it had been finished in a matter of days, leaving them with little else to do but wait for the punishment to be lifted.

Initially, the album had been something Harry had kept pretty much to himself, only taking it out to look at it when he was alone- he wasn't entirely sure how the Grangers would have reacted to having pictures of his *biological* parents around the house- but when Jane had discovered him looking at it late one night, she'd insisted that the rest of the family get a chance to look at them as well, and they'd spent some time over the subsequent days just scanning through the pages of the album, reflecting on the lives of the people who had brought Harry into the world. Hermione was still a little 'jealous' of the album,

in a way- no matter how old she became, there was always going to be a part of her that felt a bit jealous of Harry's *biological* family, even if she knew that he cared for her as a sister regardless- but, that aside, she had come to enjoy looking at the album just as much as Harry did.

*Probably because we don't have much else to remind us of Hogwarts...* Harry mused to himself, that rather depressing thought putting a dampner on his mood.

Ever since he and Hermione had returned home, they hadn't had so much as a single letter from any of their friends at school. At first, they'd been able to attribute this to the fact that their initial letter-writing privileges had been restricted after the Voldemort thing anyway- Hedwig had been allowed out of her cage to exercise, but neither had been allowed to write anything to give to her- but even after that restriction had been lifted, they'd never managed to get a reply; Hedwig left the house with the letters, came back with nothing, and they never received so much as a single reply back with her...

The fact that there wasn't even any sign of a letter *today* was starting to worry Harry, particularly since it was his birthday. He knew that the Grangers and all his adopted cousins *would* remember it, of course- they were all coming over for a party later in the day- but still, he wouldn't have minded some renewed acknowledgement from the wizarding world that he wasn't just some figure to be put up on a pedestal and worshipped...

Harry was so occupied with his train of thought that he barely even registered it when his door opened and Hermione walked in, looking inquiringly at him as she noted the album in his hands.

"Everything OK?" she asked him anxiously, as she walked over to sit beside him on the bed, looking at the album before them; on occasion, Harry had been known to start crying while studying the pictures, and wanted to make sure that this wasn't going to be another such incident.

"Yeah... I'm fine," Harry replied, nodding slightly as he looked back at Hermione. "Just... puzzled about the lack of contact we've had recently, I guess."

"Yeah... I know what you mean..." Hermione sighed as she looked back at Harry. "I mean, I get that some people might find it a bit difficult to treat *you* like a normal person, but me? I'm nothing special; why should somebody find it hard to talk to *me* about stuff...?"

"Uh, do you mean there's nothing special about you *apart* from the fact that you're the brainiest witch in our year?" Harry retorted, smiling slightly at Hermione as he spoke. "You managed to get some of the highest grades in the year, and you don't think that makes you even a *bit* intimidating to people? Y'know, you can be as smart as you like, but if it weren't for me I think you'd have absolutely *no* clue about *people*..."

"Oh, knock it off, you!" Hermione retorted, smiling slightly as she punched him lightly in the arm, before the brief amusement of the moment failed and she stood up once again. "C'mon, we'd better get changed; there's still a lot to do before we're ready for the guests to show up."

"True," Harry said, smiling slightly as he put the album off to one side. "But, hey, at least it's better than what I would have had with the Dursleys; I'd be lucky if they even *remembered* it was my birthday, quite frankly."

"Well, as it is, you don't *have* to put up with them, so we'll forget about that, OK?" Hermione stated grimly before she smiled once again and walked out the door. "Just get dressed and get down for breakfast, OK? You *know* how long it takes for you to prepare the cake properly..."

Harry rolled his eyes slightly.

"You know as well as I do that *you* were the reason I had that problem back then!" he retorted, as he glared teasingly at his sister. "The next time you want to prank me, could you *not* do it by swapping the baking powder for something?"

"Hey; *you're* the one who couldn't take the joke!" Hermione retorted teasingly. "You need to *relax* a bit at times, you know?"

“There’s a fine line between a joke and something that’s almost *cruel*, ‘Mione; you nearly went over the line with that little trick!” Harry countered back. “Admit it!”

“Never,” Hermione stated simply. “It was a joke that went out of hand; that’s all. If your cake fell apart as a result... well, that’s just a happy little accident.”

“OK, that’s it!” Harry yelled, as he jumped up, grabbed Hermione, and began to tickle her mercilessly.

“H-h-hey!” Hermione yelled, laughing uncontrollably as she pushed back against her brother. “Kn-kn-knock it off, OK!”

For a moment, Harry was tempted to continue- it had been a while since they’d had an opportunity to just muck about like this, really- but then he glanced at his watch and sighed slightly in frustration; given how long it sometimes took for them to get ready for the parties, they should probably get moving soon.

“Y’know, as fun as this is, we really don’t *quite* have the time for it right now,” he said, smiling nonchalantly at Hermione as he released his hold on her and indicated the clock. “We should probably just get moving and get everything set up for later; we’ve got to get moving if we’ll be ready for the others.”

“Yeah... fair point,” Hermione sighed, before she stood up and headed for the door. “I’ll see if Mum and Dad are up; see you downstairs in a few minutes, OK?”

“Sure thing,” Harry said, putting the album off to one side as he got up to begin getting dressed.

He’d worry about Ron’s lack of communication later; right now, he had to prepare for his birthday party.

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A few hours later, Harry and Hermione were sitting in the kitchen, once again playing their almost traditional game of Top Trumps with Natalie while the younger children watched a movie in another room and the parents ate their own evening meals in the front room. It

wasn't exactly an ideal family moment, they all knew- mostly on these occasions the family should spend time all together rather than divided amongst various rooms-, but, the way Harry saw it, they'd all spent a great deal of time together for the most part of the day, and had just taken the opportunity now that the initial hubbub had died down to do their own 'thing' in their own 'groups'. They all loved each other, of course, but sometimes you just wanted to do your own thing rather than get mixed together with some people you could have trouble relating to when you had the 'alternative' option of spending time just with those you had more in common with.

Besides, given how much younger the rest of the children were than the three of them, Harry, Hermione and Natalie generally found it easier to relate to each other as opposed to their cousins and (In Natalie's case) siblings. They loved the others, true, but sometimes they just wanted to spend some time with people in their own age group discussing something that they *knew* the others would be interested in, rather than something they just *might* be interested in.

As well as all that... well, Harry and Hermione had to admit that, since discovering about Natalie's own magical potential, they were actively seeking every opportunity they could to figure out how Natalie might react to the news that she could do magic. So far they were just trying to determine how she'd react to the idea of having 'powers', for lack of a better term, and hadn't managed to get anything definite either way; Natalie seemed to think that it would be cool, but they just couldn't be sure how she'd react to the *rest* of their news.

Harry was rapidly coming to the simple conclusion that he sometimes hated his life.

*Couldn't something in my life be simple for once?* he reflected as he studied the cards in his hand. With the part of his mind that he was 'allowing' to consider the trivial details, he wished that it was his turn soon- he only had a couple of cards left, but he knew for a *fact* that Professor X's intelligence level was one of the highest ones in the deck- but the rest of him was inwardly cursing at how complicated his life seemed to be ever since he got his Hogwarts letter.

Oh, it was *fun* at the school, he wouldn't deny that, but he just wished everything could be a bit more *straightforward* than it had been since he'd arrived there...

"Penny for your thoughts, Harry?" Natalie asked, smiling slightly over at her cousin as she glanced up from her own cards. "I'd give more, but I spent most of my money on your gift."

"And it's appreciated, trust me," Harry said, smiling slightly back at her. He anticipated several hours of enjoyment out of the Sherlock Holmes/H.P. Lovecraft 'crossover' short story book she'd given him; *Shadows over Baker Street* looked like being a *very* interesting read. "It's just... stuff at school, you know."

"Ah," Natalie said, nodding slightly in understanding. "That arrogant git you mentioned who thinks he's better than everybody else being a pain, right?"

"Yeah, among other things," Hermione said, shrugging in a poor attempt at a nonchalant manner as she looked at her cousin; they'd told Natalie as much about Hogwarts as they could without mentioning anything *specifically* magic-related, which, naturally, had included Malfoy, who in their 'rewrite' of their school's history was the typical 'rich kid' who thought his money gave him the authority to boss everybody else around.

"Like what?" Natalie inquired, looking curiously at her cousin. "Does it have anything to do with that accident you had after your exams? I heard you got into a fight that left you out of it for a while, but Mum and Dad wouldn't tell me anything more-"

"I don't want to talk about it," Harry stated firmly; the Grangers may have felt obligated to tell their relatives about his coma, but as far as he was concerned, he was content to allow them to come up with their own theories about what had actually *caused* the 'accident'. "Now, are you going to play the next card, or are we going to sit here all night?"

"Geez, ask a civil question..." Natalie mused, as she reached up to the cards in her hand. She had just placed her next card down on the table- it was Doctor Strange, Harry noted with a slight smile; ever

since learning that Natalie was a witch herself, he found it kind of amusing when she showed an interest in anything relating to magic—when there was a loud pop, and suddenly a small figure, no more than three feet high, with an oversized head and ears and spindly arms and legs, dressed in only a dirty pillow-case, appeared in the middle of the table, looking with wide eyes at Harry.

“Harry Potter...” the creature said, in an awed voice, apparently unconcerned about the presence of a confused Hermione and a shocked Natalie as it looked at him. “Such an *honour* it is...”

Harry blinked in surprise.

“Uh... you are?” he asked, crossing his fingers and praying that none of the adults would show up during this conversation; it was going to be hard enough just telling Natalie about the fact that she could do magic without working in any *more* explanations right now.

“Dobby, sir,” the creature replied, bowing politely. “Dobby the house-elf.”

“Ah,” Harry said, exchanging a surprised glance with Hermione; in all their experience with the magical world, they certainly hadn’t been expecting elves to look like *this*. “Uh... not to be rude or anything... but this isn’t exactly the *best* time to have a house-elf in this room.”

“Oh, of course sir; Dobby understands that,” Dobby said earnestly. “It is just... it is... *difficult*, sir... Dobby wonders where to begin...”

“Uh... maybe you could... sit down?” Hermione said uncertainly, indicating the free chair opposite her on the table.

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Hermione wondered if she’d made a mistake; the small creature’s eyes suddenly filled with tears and he began bluddering like a terrified infant.

“S-sit down!” he wailed; Harry was only grateful that the rest of the visitors were far enough away from the room not to hear the current ‘conversation’, otherwise he’d have even more questions to deal with. “Never... never ever...!”

“Dobby, stop *crying*, will you?” Hermione hissed; they were just lucky that the creature’s wails hadn’t attracted any attention *already*, at the volume he was wailing at. “We didn’t mean to offend you or anything-”

“*Offend* Dobby?” the creature said, looking incredulously at Hermione. “Dobby has never been *asked* to sit down by a witch or wizard... like an *equal*...”

Apparently, this was enough to break Natalie out of her stunned silence.

“*Witch?!* ” she yelled, looking incredulously at Hermione before her gaze turned to Harry. “*Wizard?! What the Hell have you guys been keeping from me?*”

“OK, in our defence, we were *planning* on telling you soon-” Harry said, looking apologetically at his cousin, hoping that Dobby wouldn’t mind being temporarily ignored right now.

“Oh, like *when*; when you *had* to?” Natalie protested, standing up to glare at Harry. “Y’know, I thought you guys *trusted* me with stuff like this, and you couldn’t even be *bothered* to tell me-”

At that moment, Natalie waved one arm in frustration, and suddenly all the cards on the table were floating in mid-air, suspended about a foot off solid ground with no apparent regard being paid to the laws of physics.

As Natalie’s eyes widened in shock at what she’d just done, Harry shrugged apologetically.

“*That* would be the reason why we didn’t tell you straight away,” he said, sheepishly. “We figured that, since you could do magic *yourself*, we should probably wait to tell you about it until you *had* to know... there’s this whole ‘Decree for the Restriction of Under-Age Wizardry’ thing that prevents you from using magic outside of school, and we didn’t want to tell you about it and then get you in trouble for trying to do magic on purpose...”



He shrugged once again as Natalie continued to stare in shock at the floating cards. "Stuff like this is OK- accidental magic tends to happen a lot when you're young and feeling some strong emotion or another- but you can't do anything *deliberate* at the moment, and we didn't want to leave you feeling frustrated because you knew what you *could* do if you had the chance and couldn't do right now."

"Oh," Natalie said in a small voice, as she looked uncertainly at her hand before looking inquiringly up at Harry. "Uh... when *do* I get to have a wand?"

"If the school operates on the same system for you as it did for us- and we have no reason to think it won't- you can get one in a couple of years from now when you get your letter to come to Hogwarts in the first place," Hermione put in, looking sympathetically at her younger cousin. "Just... don't tell your parents about all this *just* yet, OK? We'll tell you what we can beforehand, but we'd rather not tell *them* anything until we've got something to prove we're not mad."

(OK, so Harry *could* legitimately show the MacDonalds the invisibility cloak or the photo album as proof of magic without attracting any unwanted attention from the Ministry of Magic, but, at the moment, he wasn't *quite* ready to share the few mementos he had of his biological parents with everybody he knew at the moment.)

Realising that Dobby was still standing in the middle of the table, silently waiting for them to finish talking, Harry cursed mentally as he turned back to the strange new arrival; he really shouldn't have allowed himself to get distracted like that.

"Uh... sorry about ignoring you like that; we just had to-" he began, before Dobby started blubbering again.

"Harry Potter is too good to Dobby! Harry Potter shows concern about-" Dobby began, before Hermione clapped a hand over his mouth; his voice was starting to reach an uncomfortably high volume, and if it got too loud they'd probably be discovered.

"Will you *stop* wailing about everything?" Hermione asked, looking anxiously at the house-elf. "We've got other people in here, you know,

and not *all* of them know that we're magical! We'd rather *not* have to answer too many questions, if that's OK with you?"

"Of... of course, Miss..." Dobby began, before pausing and looking uncertainly at Hermione. "Who is you again, Miss?"

"Oh... Hermione Granger, Harry's adopted sister," Hermione replied, looking uncertainly at the elf; she didn't want him to start blubbering about how great *she* was as well.

"Of course!" Dobby said, suddenly smiling as though he'd just remembered something he'd heard a while back. "You is the Know-It-All Witch!"

"Uh... not the most *flattering* description, but... yeah, that's me," Hermione replied, looking in confusion at the elf; Dobby had sounded almost overly respectful to Harry earlier, but right now he'd almost seemed to be insulting her without fully realising it.

"OK, if you're here to tell me anything, I've just got a few simple ground-rules," Harry interjected, looking critically at the house-elf before him. "Firstly, you're to keep all noise to a minimum; secondly, you *don't* call Hermione that again- I'd rather you referred to her as 'Hermione Granger' rather than that- and where did you hear her referred to as that anyway?"

"Dobby apologises for the insult, Hermione Granger," the elf said, looking briefly at Hermione before returning his attention to Harry. "And Dobby heard Hermione Granger described as that by his... his..."

Before Dobby could finish speaking, his eyes suddenly widened in horror, as though his ears had just processed what his mouth was saying, resulting in him dashing over to the wall behind Natalie and proceeded to bash his head against it, yelling out "Bad Dobby! *Bad Dobby!*"

"Oh for crying out- *stop* that!" Natalie yelled, grabbing the small creature by his tattered pillowcase and yanking him back. "Rule number three while you're here is simple; *don't* beat yourself up like that!"

"And why did you *do* that anyway?" Hermione inquired, looking in confusion at the small figure before her.

"Dobby had to punish himself, miss," Dobby explained; Harry noted that his eyes had gone slightly cross-eyed. "Dobby almost spoke ill of his family, miss... it is clear that Dobby has insulted you by referring to you as such, Miss..."

"Your family?" Harry asked.

"The family Dobby serves, sir... " Dobby explained, looking pathetically at the children before him.

"Sorry; what's all this about your family?" Natalie inquired; Harry had to admit, given that magic was a totally new concept to her, she seemed to be coping with Dobby's presence rather well.

"They are the wizard family Dobby serves, Miss... Dobby is a house-elf, bound to serve one house and one family forever... if they ever knew Dobby was *here*..."

For a moment, the small creature almost seemed to shudder at the thought of what would happen to him if his presence was discovered, but then he regained control and continued speaking. "But Dobby had to come.... Dobby has to protect Harry Potter... to warn him that *Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts this year.*"

Harry blinked in surprise.

"Excuse me?" he said, looking in confusion at Dobby. "You've come all this way to tell me to stay away from Hogwarts? Why?"

"There is a plot, sir," Dobby explained; Harry noticed that the small creature kept on anxiously glancing around as though he was terrified that somebody would overhear him. "A plot to make most terrible things happen at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry... but Harry Potter must not put himself in peril! He is too great, too good-"

"Sorry to interrupt, but Harry was in danger at school *last* year too- in fact, he ended up in a *coma* as a result of it- and he came out fine," Hermione pointed out as she looked critically at the house-elf. "Look,

Dobby, we appreciate your concern for my brother, but... look, do you actually *know* what makes a 'great wizard' great?"

"Uh..." Dobby muttered, looking uncertainly at Harry for a moment before he spoke, his voice lacking some of the earnest eagerness it had possessed earlier, "Harry Potter is brave, powerful, wise, and much too nice to a poor house-elf?"

"Actually, I tend to think of a great wizard being someone who *does* great things," Harry stated, as he looked grimly at the small figure before him. He hated trying to *use* his 'reputation' like this, but, even as he spoke, he knew that he was only saying the truth.

If something dangerous *was* going to happen at Hogwarts, he was *going* to try and stop it, no matter how dangerous it was.

Besides... after learning the truth about his biological parents, even if he'd been suffering from a significant *lack* of contact with his school friends so far, he really wanted to learn more about the world they'd spent their lives in.

"Look, Dobby," he continued, as he crouched down to look the small creature in the eyes, trying to sound more confident than he felt, "I appreciate your concern for me, but if I'm going to *be* a great wizard, I need to have the opportunity to *stop* bad stuff happening, OK?"

"Uh... yeah... what he said," Natalie said, nodding slightly bemusedly as she looked at the small creature; she was evidently burning with curiosity about *why* Harry was a 'Great Wizard' in the first place, but she at least understood that now wasn't the time to ask about that.

For a moment, there was silence in the room as Harry, Hermione and Natalie looked anxiously at the elf, wondering if he would still tell Harry that he couldn't go to Hogwarts, but, finally, Dobby nodded.

"Very well, Harry Potter; Dobby shall not stop you going to Hogwarts," he said, as he looked at the young wizard. "Just... promise Dobby that you shall be careful."

Harry chuckled slightly.

“When am I *not* careful?” he asked casually as he looked at his ‘sister’ and cousin. Hermione briefly opened her mouth to reply, but stopped herself in time; it wouldn’t help their current problem if she recalled some of the times when Harry *hadn’t* been careful...

“Dobby must go now, or Dobby’s family will know,” Dobby said, smiling slightly at Harry. “Dobby knows Harry Potter will become the greatest wizard ever!”

With that, the small creature clicked his fingers and vanished.

“Huh,” Harry said, raising his eyebrow as he looked at the sight before him. “That was weird.”

“Yeah...” Natalie said uncertainly, before she turned to look critically at Harry. “By the way, as long as we’re here, do you mind telling me *why* that elf wanted to warn *you* in particular?”

“Ah,” Harry said, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. “Well, that is a *rather* unusual story...”

## Chapter 2 – Off to the Burrow

The next morning, with the guests all having gone home and the presents and wrapping cleared away, Harry and Hermione were sitting at the breakfast table, Harry munching on a piece of toast while Hermione sipped at her cup of water and waited for their parents to come down, each one of them reflecting on the events of yesterday.

Although the aftermath of Dobby's bizarre, brief little visit had gone rather well- despite Harry's fears, Natalie had found the whole 'Boy Who Lived' thing to be cool rather than anything else-, after Harry had managed to pull Alan and Jane aside to tell them about Dobby's arrival, it had been decided that they didn't have the time or the proof to convince Natalie's parents that their daughter, niece *and* adopted nephew were all capable of magic. The Grangers would try and think of something to convince them that they weren't crazy by the time of the McDonald's next visit, but until then, Natalie had promised to keep her discovery secret.

Alan and Jane, while not quite agreeing with Harry's reasons for not wanting to show the album as evidence, accepted that the album might not be that convincing; neither Harry or Hermione had told them about the cloak, and his Nimbus would have attracted too much attention if they'd used it, which left them with nothing that they could use at the moment; the school books could simply have been elaborate fakes, and they lacked the time and materials necessary to make a decent potion. As a result, Natalie had promised to keep quite about her magical status for the moment until the Grangers could come up with some incontrovertible proof that they weren't simply making up an elaborate story for the sake of it, and the Grangers would try and work out something they could use as proof.

All in all, though, Harry was grateful that he had somebody else in his family to talk to about his wizarding status. True, it would be difficult to talk much with Natalie about the whole thing- sending letters to her via Hedwig wouldn't exactly be easy, given that owls knocking at windows wasn't exactly the kind of thing Natalie's parents would miss- but it was the principle of the thing, really; it was one less

person he needed to lie to when he was away from Hogwarts, and that was more than enough for him.

Harry was just getting up to prepare another piece of toast- as well as go up to see if his parents were awake yet- when there was a sudden sharp knocking at the kitchen window.

“What’s...?” Hermione began, before she turned to look in the direction of the tapping and her eyes widened at the sight before them.

It was an old- *extremely* old, it would appear- owl, with so many feathers moulting all over it that it bore more resemblance to a feather duster than a living being, looking at the two children inside the room with a letter clutched in its beak.

“Oh my word...” Hermione continued, as she stood up and walked over to the window, opening it to allow the owl to hop weakly into the kitchen. “Who in the world would send out an owl *this* old? The thing looks like it’s going to die any second...”

Her voice trailed off as her eyes settled on the letter that the owl still clutched in its beak, despite it continuing to sway backwards and forwards in a manner that gave the impression that the thing was about to collapse at any moment.

Specifically, her eyes were fixed on the very familiar, somewhat untidy scrawl that Hermione had come to recognise all too easily from helping Ron go over his homework essays.

“It’s from *Ron*?” she said, almost half to herself as she looked up at Harry in surprise. “After all this time, he’s sending a letter to us *now*?”

“Mmm...” Harry said, nodding thoughtfully as he studied the letter he now held in his hands, before he opened it and began to read.

*Harry and Hermione,*

*What’s up with you guys? Did I do something wrong or something? This is like the twelfth letter I’ve sent to you guys since term ended,*

*and I still haven't received a reply. Are you not getting them, or are you mad at me for something?*

*If it's the second one, and you're annoyed because I screwed up or something during that whole thing with the Stone and the chess game and you're mad at me for it or whatever, I'm sorry, but you could at least tell me you're mad rather than just ignoring me all the time!*

*If you just haven't got any of the other ones, Mum was wondering if you two would like to spend the rest of the summer over her with the rest of us. It's all pretty quiet over here, at least; Fred and George occasionally like to test a few little jokes on us, Percy's just as much of a pain as he ever is, and Ginny keeps on talking about meeting you, but that's life, I suppose.*

*Hope you reply to this one,*

*Sincerely,*

*Ron.*

Harry blinked slightly in surprise as he finished the note.

"He... he says he's sent letters *before* this one?" he said, looking up at Hermione in surprise as he studied the contents of the letter in his hand. "But... why haven't we received any of *them*?"

"Good question..." Hermione mused, nodding thoughtfully as she took the letter from her brother, clearly turning over the possible answers in her mind. "I mean, we've got no reason to believe he's *lying* about that, but if something's just been *stopping* us from getting letters rather than him just not writing them in the first place, why would we start getting them *now*?"

"Well..." Harry said, clicking his fingers for a few moments- a little trick he sometimes used when trying to inspire his mind to come up with a solution to a problem- before he looked back at Hermione, "the *obvious* answer is that something's changed recently which means that we can now *get* the letters, when we couldn't get them before... and, as far as we know," he continued, inspiration dawning in his eyes as he smiled at his sister, "only *one* thing has changed in the



last twenty-four hours- apart from Natalie finding out about magic, of course.”

Hermione’s eyes widened.

“Dobby was convinced to let us go back to Hogwarts!” she said, before she sighed and leaned over the table, her head clasped in her hands. “Well, at least *that* mystery’s sorted out; *he* was stopping the mail from getting through...”

“Yeah... must have been hoping that we wouldn’t go back to Hogwarts if we thought nobody cared enough about us to bother writing...” Harry mused, before chuckling slightly as he glanced back at Hermione. “As if *that* could happen, huh?”

“Yeah, I’ve got to agree with you on that one,” Hermione replied, a smile crossing her own face as she recalled the events of the past year. “I mean, Ron and the twins may have their issues, but they’re definitely *not* the kind of people who’d just leave us high and dry like that for no reason; we’d have gone back to Hogwarts just to find out why they *hadn’t* been writing to us...”

“Plus, you couldn’t resist the opportunity to learn more about magic, huh?” Harry said, smiling slightly at his sister. “Y’know, you’re way too easy to predict at times...”

“Oh, like you aren’t *just* as eager to find out a bit more about magic?” Hermione retorted, smiling affectionately at him before she sighed and stood up, a slight smile on her face as she picked the exhausted owl up in the process. “I’ll just take him up to Hedwig’s perch and let Mum and Dad know about the letter, OK? I’m pretty sure they’ll agree to us going over to the Weasleys’ later on in the summer, but I’d just like to make sure soon.”

“Fair enough,” Harry said, nodding in agreement as he swallowed the last of his toast and stood up. “I’ll join you; not much point in just one of us going up when the two of us could make a more convincing argument.”

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In the end, however, the term 'argument' turned out to be a serious exaggeration for the conversation that subsequently took place; Alan and Jane were perfectly willing for Harry and Hermione to visit the Weasley household for a couple of weeks or so until Hogwarts started once again. Having written the reply- omitting reference to Dobby; Harry would prefer to discuss that with the Weasleys face-to-face rather than mention it in a letter-, Harry had sent Hedwig to deliver it, the Weasley's owl remaining on her perch to try and recover its strength until it was ready to depart for home the following day. Given the rapid pace of owl post, Harry had little doubt that Hedwig would reach Ron's house in a matter of hours at most, and both he and Hermione went to bed that night with their bags packed and ready for

The next morning, with their belongings all packed away the night before, Harry and Hermione had just finished a relatively late breakfast- they'd only managed to get around to eating by around half-past nine, having slept in the night before after watching a new movie Harry had been given for his birthday- when there was a ringing at the doorbell.

"I'll get it!" Harry said, smiling up at Alan and Jane as he hurried towards the door, opening it to see Ron standing there, a slight smile on his face and a tall man beside him who could only be his father. Mr Weasley was a thin man with receding red hair in the same shade as his assorted children, dressed in a dusty green robe and looking eagerly around himself.

"Hey, Ron," Harry said, smiling briefly at his friend before he looked up at the older man. "Hello, Mr Weasley."

"Oh, hello... you'd be Harry Potter, correct?" Mr Weasley said, looking down at him with a brief smile before he continued to study the house around him. "Incredible place you have here, just *incredible...*"

"Don't mind Dad; he's always enthusiastic about anything muggle-related," Ron said by way of explanation, before he glanced behind Harry and smiled slightly. "Hey, Hermione."

"Hi, Ron," Hermione said- she'd come up behind Harry while he was answering the door- before she glanced back to where Alan and Jane were standing at the stairs with a slight smile on their faces as they looked at their children's friend. "Oh, Ron, these are our parents; Mum, Dad, this is Ron."

"Good to meet you at last, Ron," Alan said, nodding briefly at the young red-headed boy before he turned to the man standing beside Ron and held out his hand. "Hello there; Alan Granger."

"Arthur Weasley; *pleasure* to meet you," Mr Weasley replied, taking Alan's hand and enthusiastically shaking it as he walked into the house, a broad smile on his face as he studied the walls of the house, the grin only becoming broader as he saw the switch by the door. "Good gracious, is that a *lightswitch*?"

"Um... yes, it is," Jane said, looking slightly uncertainly at the man before her; she clearly wasn't sure whether to be flattered or disturbed by the attention he was giving her house.

"Fascinating..." Mr Weasley muttered, half to himself, as he reached out and flicked the switch on and off, before looking inquiringly over at the Grangers. "Just out of curiosity, as long as your children are staying over, you wouldn't mind showing me around here at some point? I really find this all *fascinating*..."

For a moment, Alan and Jane exchanged glances, each of them clearly considering whether or not to agree to this man's request, but, finally, Jane nodded and looked back at Mr Weasley.

"Well, how does this sound?" she asked, looking inquiringly at the other adult. "You answer any questions we might have about the wizarding world while you're over here, and we'll answer any questions you have about the... muggle one; that's the correct term, right?"

"Really?" Mr Weasley said, looking eagerly at the Grangers as he smiled. "That would be *excellent*; when would you be available?"

"Yeah, uh, you guys just sort that out; Hermione and I'll get our things," Harry said, indicating the stairs; he and Hermione had left

their bags up in their rooms until the last minute just in case they remembered something else they wanted to bring. Although it took them a couple of minutes to haul their bags downstairs (Even without actually packing for Hogwarts- they were intending to come back before the trip to platform nine and three quarters- the bags were still surprisingly heavy), neither Ron or his father seemed to mind about the delay. By the time they got back down, Mr Weasley was engaged in a clearly animated discussion with their parents, while Ron just studied his surroundings with a slight grin as though he wasn't sure whether he should be standing here and was enjoying his time looking around before somebody realised he wasn't meant to be there.

"We're ready," Hermione said, smiling slightly at the pleased-yet-bemused expressions on her parents' faces as Mr Weasley studied their toaster with a slight smile while Ron flicked briefly through a couple of Harry and Hermione's old comics that were lying around the room.

"Oh, really?" Mr Weasley said, looking up at the young witch with a brief expression of regret before he smiled, put the toaster down and looked back at the Grangers. "I'll see you... does next week work for you?"

"Oh... yes, that should be fine," Jane said, smiling in agreement at the other man before she turned to smile over at her children. "We'll see you in a week, OK? Have fun, and try to stay *out* of trouble for once, possibly?"

Hermione chuckled slightly.

"We'll try," she said casually. "We can't *promise* anything, of course, but we'll see what we can do."

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After a couple of hours of driving- during which Harry sometimes had the distinct impression that the Ford Anglia had taken a couple of routes that definitely *weren't* listed on any muggle map he'd looked at in his life- the car pulled up in front of a small house on the outskirts of a little village called Ottery St Catchpole.

Even without knowing that the Weasleys were there, Harry knew at once that the house was magical; the fact that it looked like it was going to fall over at any second yet continued to stay up in defiance of all known laws of physics was one clear clue, as was the almost ridiculous amount of stories that it seemed to possess. Four or five chimneys were perched on the top of the building, a jumble of wellingtons and an extremely rusty cauldron surrounded the door, while various brown chickens pecked their way around the yard.

"It's not much, but it's home," Ron said, shrugging slightly as the car pulled up.

"It's *brilliant*," Harry smiled, as he glanced up at the house before glancing over at Hermione. "You have to admit, it's more interesting than some of the places we've been to."

"Tell me about it," Hermione chuckled, as she, Harry and Ron got out of the car while Mr Weasley moved to park it. "I mean, OK, so it *is* an architect's nightmare, but who cares about the little details like that, right?"

"Indeed," Harry stated, a slight smile on his face as he walked into the house. The first room they entered appeared to be a kitchen, although it was surprisingly cramped given how roomy the car had appeared to be when they were driving over here. Harry wondered if the charms that had made the car so roomy just didn't work on something that would need to serve as a permanent means of habitation and only worked when the person would only be in it for a few hours or so.

"Ah, Harry Potter, I presume?" a voice said from off to one side. Glancing in the direction of the voice, Harry smiled slightly as he saw Fred and George sitting at one end of the table, smiling up at him with an expression that suggested to Harry that he was going to be the victim of some elaborate joke at some point in his time here and they were just trying to work out what the joke would actually be.

"Indeed," Harry stated, folding his arms as he looked at the twins, a small smirk on his face as he did so. "'So, what are you two planning?'"

“Planning?” one of the twins- Harry guessed Fred; he wasn’t sure *how* he could specifically tell the difference, but there was definitely one there once you got to know them- said, holding one hand to his chest as though somebody had just stabbed him. “Harry, I am *insulted*-”

“That you would even *think*-” George said, taking up a similar posture to his brother.

“That we would *ever*-”

“Stoop so low-”

“And fall so far-”

“As to actually *prank*-”

“The boy who saved the world!”

“Oh, knock it off; you two would probably prank *Dumbledore* if you thought you could get away with it,” Ron sighed, shaking his head with an amused grin on his face as he studied his brothers. “Anyway, where’s Ginny and Percy?”

“Still in their rooms,” George answered, shrugging slightly as he glanced over at Ron. “Don’t suppose you’ve got any ideas about what they’re doing in there, by the way? I mean, Perce has been sending all those letters lately, so it’s not like it’s anything new there, but *Ginny*? At *this* time of day?”

“Is that unusual?” Hermione asked, glancing over inquiringly at the youngest male Weasley.

“Well, given that Ginny’s been talking about meeting you pretty much all summer- going out of her way to be up early to ask me as much as possible about you-, I’d have thought she’d be down here by now; it wasn’t exactly a secret that I’d finally managed to get through to you after almost a *month* of trying,” Ron said, a slight grin on his face before his expression became more serious. “Talking of which, what was all that about anyway?”

"Oh, we had some crazy house-elf trying to block our mail- well, we think it was him; he didn't say anything about it-, but the mail started coming after we convinced him we'd be going to Hogwarts regardless of his warnings about some plot to make something terrible happen this year," Harry explained, making a mental note to try and ask Hermione not to tease him about Ginny's eagerness for more information about him- a forlorn hope, he knew, but he'd have to try- before he looked more seriously at Ron. "On that topic, you remember that cousin of ours we mentioned was a witch?"

"Wait a minute; you've got *another* witch in the family?" Fred said, looking in surprise at Hermione, before a shocked expression crossed his face as though he'd just had a horrible thought. "*Please* tell me she isn't as scarily smart as you are?"

Hermione chuckled slightly at the expression on Fred's face. "No, she's only fairly smart; I'd put her at about Harry's level or something like that," she said, shrugging nonchalantly at the two redheads. "Anyway, you don't have to worry about her yet; she won't be coming to Hogwarts for another couple of years or so, so you've got plenty of time to improve your marks so that you're *not* being beaten in your exams by a first year."

"Ouch!" George said, clutching his heart with one hand as though he'd just been stabbed. "Hermione, that *really* hurts!"

"Oh, give it a break-" Harry began, only to be interrupted by the sound of a brief squeak as a door opened. Glancing in the direction of the voice, he only just had time to see a small red-haired figure wearing a blue dressing-gown over what looked like pink pyjamas- the dressing-gown made it hard to see anything clearly- before the door slammed shut once again and they heard the faint sound of footsteps hurrying back up the stairs.

"Well, there's Ginny," Ron said, chuckling slightly as he glanced over at his friend. "You'll want to watch out for her, Harry; she's been talking about you all summer."

"*That* much, eh?" Hermione said, a slight grin on her face as she looked back at Harry. "Well, that's *definitely* something worth keeping in mind..."

“Oh God...” Harry groaned to himself.

If he recognised that look on Hermione’s face, he was going to be teased *mercilessly* about this for the rest of the summer...

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AN: This chapter isn’t as long as some of them, but I just reached a convenient place to end it and thought it was best to start the new one. The next one features some details of their time at the Burrow, the trip to Diagon Alley, and Harry’s reaction to his sister’s little ‘celebrity crush’...



## Chapter 3 – A Floo Detour

Fortunately, Harry's fears about how much teasing he'd receive regarding Ginny talking about him were apparently exaggerated. Over the course of the next week or so, the two Granger siblings- one adopted and one biological- soon came to feel like they'd discovered long-lost relatives at the Burrow. The Weasleys couldn't have been more welcoming to Harry and Hermione if they'd been related to the family of redheads, Mrs Weasley constantly making sure that they had at least a third helping available at mealtimes and Mr Weasley always asking them for further information about various muggle pieces of technology. Hermione would never be sure how they'd managed to get through his question about the purpose of a rubber duck with a straight face, to say nothing of when Harry was asked about how the muggle postal service managed to get letters where they were meant to go.

*"Fascinating!"* he said, smiling broadly as Harry explained the part that postal codes played in the postage process. *"Ingenious, really, the ways that muggles have found to cope without magic."*

However, although Harry and Hermione quickly established a friendly relationship with the Weasley parents, it was surprisingly harder to establish a relaxed friendship with all four of Ron's 'available' siblings (Their relationship with Bill and Charlie obviously wasn't relevant as neither of the two were here at present, although Hermione was eager to ask Bill about curse-breaking while Harry wouldn't have minded learning how Norbert was coming along). The two Granger siblings soon managed to establish as relaxed a friendship with the twins as one ever could- Fred and George apparently tended to surprise even their closest friends by pranking them at a moment's notice, making it hard for Harry and Hermione to ever completely let their guard down in a conversation with the two seemingly insatiable jokers-, but Percy spent most of his time locked up in his room writing several letters, and Ginny rarely came out of her room outside of mealtimes ever since Harry arrived in the house. Hermione sometimes managed to engage the younger girl in conversation whenever the boys were out playing Quidditch, but Ginny still seemed reluctant to talk to Harry himself, and even when in his presence she

ended up doing what could only be described as a rather vivid impression of a tomato whenever he so much as asked her to pass the salt.

A few days after their arrival at the Burrow, Harry and Hermione finally heard from Hogwarts about their book list for the upcoming year. They'd just come to breakfast with Ron, only to find Mr and Mrs Weasley and Ginny already sitting there; the twins were typically late risers anyway, and Percy rarely ate with the rest of his family, preferring to spend time up in his room writing all those letters that nobody knew the purpose of and nobody really felt like asking about.

Harry had just sat down to start eating his bacon- Ginny had briefly knocked over her porridge bowl as Harry sat down opposite her, but he was trying not to draw attention to it for both their sakes-, when he suddenly registered the two identical envelopes of yellowish parchment, addressed in green ink, sitting in front of their plates.

"The letters from school," Mr Weasley explained, indicating the envelopes in question. "Dumbledore already knew you two were here, apparently; doesn't miss a trick, that man."

"Ah," Harry said, nodding briefly at that- he wondered how Dumbledore had known that particular bit of information, but decided it wasn't worth worrying about right now- as he turned his attention back to the letter.

Second	year	students	will	require;
<i>The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Two</i>			by Miranda	Goshawk
<i>Break with a Banshee</i>		by	Gilderoy	Lockhart
<i>Gadding with Ghouls</i>		by	Gilderoy	Lockhart
<i>Holidays with Hags</i>		by	Gilderoy	Lockhart
<i>Travels with Trolls</i>		by	Gilderoy	Lockhart
<i>Voyages with Vampires</i>		by	Gilderoy	Lockhart
<i>Wanderings with Werewolves</i>		by	Gilderoy	Lockhart
<i>Year with the Yeti</i> by Gilderoy Lockhart				

Harry blinked in surprise at the various books on the list; *seven* different books by the same author on one book list? That seemed a bit... extravagant- although obsessive was probably the better term,

now that he thought about it- in his opinion; the guy couldn't be *that* good at his job to merit them getting all of those books.

"You've been told to get all of Lockhart's books too?" Ron said, looking at Harry's list after taking a brief glance over his own. "This new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher must be a fan- bet it's a witch."

Recalling the handsome-yet-(In Harry's opinion)-ridiculously-appearance-obsessed face that he'd seen on one of the Lockhart books in the Burrow's kitchen- something about *Gilderoy Lockhart's Guide to Household Pets*, he recalled the title had been-, Harry had to admit that the reasoning sounded good; that Lockhart guy *did* seem like the kind of person who'd attract a lot of female attention. Normally, he might have found it funny, but given that he'd once come down early to find *Hermione* looking at the picture with a look on her face that somehow combined the look she had whenever the two of them were playing with the look she had when she received a much-longed-for book for her birthday or Christmas- the same look that seemed to be trying to appear on her face at the moment as she studied the list-, well...

The joke lost at least *some* of its appeal when his sister was one of the people he'd be making fun of with it; some friendly teasing was one thing, but that was something he had absolutely no interest in teasing Hermione about and would far prefer to encourage her to get over the whole thing as soon as possible.

It wasn't that Harry was *jealous* of Lockhart; he just didn't like the idea of some old guy who'd written a lot of books with stupid titles attracting *that* kind of attention from his usually intelligent sister. He'd tried to figure out some way to confront her about it, but it wasn't exactly the kind of thing you could just drop into casual conversation, and he was still figuring out a more tactful way to phrase his concerns about the way she kept mooning over that picture than 'What are you *doing*, you idiot?' He didn't want to sound like just some git of an overprotective brother, but on the other hand, he was sure it was some unspoken rule of his role as her brother that he stop her doing something like this before things went too far...

"That lot won't come cheap," George groaned from off to one side as he studied his own list; Harry had been so lost in his own thoughts that he didn't register that the twins had come down in the meantime. "Lockhart's books are really expensive."

"Well, we'll manage," Mrs Weasley said, trying to conceal her somewhat apprehensive expression from her children; Harry briefly thought about offering to help out with the school supplies, but decided he didn't want to draw too much attention to his financial situation and stayed silent. "I expect we'll be able to pick up some of Ginny's things second-hand while we're there."

"Oh, you're starting Hogwarts this year?" Harry asked Ginny, looking politely over at her. Ginny, however, didn't respond like he'd hoped; she just nodded, squeaked, and stuck her elbow in the butter-dish, Percy's sudden arrival in the room being the only thing that prevented Hermione from noting down further material with which to tease him later.

"Harry and I'll owl Mum and Dad about it," Hermione said, getting up and glancing over at Harry. "We can all meet down at Diagon Alley and get everything together before we head back home; it saves us the trouble of getting a lift back home, if nothing else."

"Yeah, sounds good," Harry agreed, as he swallowed another bit of bacon. The two Grangers had been planning on picking the two of them up at some point in the next week or so, allowing them to spend their last week or so of the holidays back home before returning to Hogwarts, so this arrangement at least saved them the hassle of trying to arrange a decent time for Mr Weasley to take them back home via the car or something like that.

"I'll meet you up at the hill once I've written the letter, OK?" he continued, glancing over at Ron and the twins as he did so, both of whom nodded. The four of them had spent some time after Harry arrived practicing some flying skills in a small paddock that the Weasleys owned behind the house, but after a while Harry had insisted that Hermione be given some flying lessons as well- there was no telling when something like that could come in useful- and she'd started to join them. Harry had tried to ask Ginny- through

Hermione, of course- to join them once or twice, but every time Hermione asked Ginny apparently squeaked and then became very occupied in studying a book or whatever was immediately available for her to look occupied with. They'd tried asking Percy once or twice, but he'd always turned them down, saying that he had 'something to do' in his room.

Given how much time Percy spent up there, Harry was rapidly reaching the point where he wasn't sure if he wanted to know what Ron's older brother was doing up there; it would either be humiliating for him, or seriously disturbing for Harry if he found out, and if it was both, he *really* didn't want to know what it was...

*Ah well*, Harry mused to himself, as he ate the last of his bacon before heading up to write a quick letter to his parents about this latest chain of events- Hermione still didn't have an owl of her own so Harry tended to write all their letters for them-, *I suppose there's some mysteries you just can't solve; all you can do is wonder.*

Besides, it wasn't like it was a particularly *big* mystery; it'd be nice to know the answer, but since it seemed to something uniquely related to Percy, he wasn't that concerned about it.

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A couple of days later, having been woken early by Mrs Weasley and given a few quick bacon sandwiches each, Harry, Hermione and the Weasleys stood in front of the fireplace as Mrs Weasley picked a flowerpot off the kitchen mantelpiece, peering inside it.

"We're running low, Arthur," she sighed as she looked up at her husband. "We'll have to get some more while we're out... ah well, guests first! After you, Harry."

As he stared at the pot Mrs Weasley was now holding out to him, Harry was silent for a few moments, desperately wracking his brains for some explanation as to why his hosts were offering him a pot full of some kind of dust, before a possible explanation occurred to him based on something he and Hermione had read in a book about magical transportation.

"Floo powder?" he asked, looking inquiringly up at Mrs Weasley, who nodded in confirmation.

"Really?" Hermione said, leaning over to look in the pot before turning to look at her brother with an eager smile on her face. "Well, this should be interesting; we've never done *this* before."

"You haven't?" Mr Weasley said, looking in surprise at the two of them. "But how did you get to London last time?"

"We took the underground-"

"Really?" Mr Weasley said eagerly. "Were there *escapators*? How exactly-?"

"Not *now*, Arthur," Mrs Weasley interrupted, looking critically at her husband before she turned back to the Granger children. "Floo powder's a lot quicker, dears, but if you've never used it before-"

"Mrs Weasley," Hermione began, raising her hand in a calming gesture, "Harry and I both appreciate your concern, but we've read all about it in one of our books; I'm reasonably confident that we can use it properly."

Personally, Harry wasn't as convinced about that as his sister was- she tended to forget that practical experience could sometimes be more invaluable than just reading about something, no matter how detailed a description she'd read.

"Right then," Fred said, nodding slightly as he looked at the grate before taking a handful of the powder, "I'll go first, alright?"

With that, he threw the powder into the fire, which instantly turned bright green and rose higher than Fred. Apparently unconcerned about the flames, he stepped into the fire, called out "Diagon Alley!", and vanished.

"Just remember, you have to speak clearly when you do it, dears," Mrs Weasley said, as George took the powder and moved to the fire. "And mind you get out at the right grate; there's a lot of wizard fires to choose from, but as long as you've spoken clearly-"

“Got it,” Harry said, taking advantage of the temporary distraction as George vanished into the fire to speak. “Don’t worry, we’ll be fine, and Mum and Dad will understand if things go a bit wrong; using something for the first time, they get that things can’t be perfect.”

“Well... all right,” Mrs Weasley said, sighing slightly in resignation as she spoke. “Harry, you go in after Arthur- Hermione can go in next-, but be sure to clearly say where you’re going when you step into the fire-”

“And keep your elbows tucked in,” Ron added; Harry wondered if the reasons behind that ‘rule’ were the same as the reasons why *Star Trek* characters had to stand straight on the transporters, but soon decided he didn’t want to know the answer.

“And shut your eyes,” Mrs Weasley added. “The soot-”

“Don’t fidget,” Ron interjected, “or you might well fall out of the wrong fireplace-”

“But don’t panic and get out too early; wait until you see Fred and George.”

Swallowing slightly- this was starting to sound a bit riskier than he’d expected- Harry stepped up to the fire and scattered the powder into the flames. Initially, the experience seemed almost pleasant- the fire felt like a warm breeze when he stepped into it- but then he got a mouthful of soot when he opened his mouth to speak.

“D-Diagon A-Alley!” he choked out around the soot, barely registering the concerned expression on his sister’s face before he suddenly had the impression of being sucked rapidly down some kind of plughole. As he spun rapidly around, a deafening roar in his ears, he was forced to shut his eyes against the whirling green flames surrounding him, only vaguely registering as something bashed against his elbow. There was a brief feeling of cold hands all over his face, his stomach feeling like it was about to expel the bacon sandwiches he’d consumed barely minutes ago, and then he suddenly fell face-forward onto a hard stone floor and his glasses cracked.

Glancing up at his surroundings, Harry groaned as he took in the dimly lit wizard's shop around him; judging from the severed hand on a cushion, the bloodstained deck of cards (Did wizards actually *do* card tricks normally or was Exploding Snap the be-all and end-all of genuine card-related magic?), the malicious-looking masks and rusty spiked instruments hanging from the walls and ceiling, and, of course, the assortment of human bones, the odds of anything here being used in Hogwarts were mind-bogglingly slim.

He'd just begun to turn towards the door when he saw the tragically familiar platinum-haired form of Draco Malfoy walking past the window- Malfoy was probably the only thing about Hogwarts' daily life that Harry *didn't* miss-, prompting him to turn around and hide inside a nearby cabinet, leaving only a small crack between the doors for him to peer through, seconds before Malfoy walked into the shop as a bell chimed. Peering through the crack, Harry watched as a tall, long-haired man who could only be Malfoy's father, possessing the same pale, pointed face and cold grey eyes, entered the shop behind him, looking critically at Malfoy as he reached for a glass eye.

"Touch *nothing*, Draco," he said bluntly.

"You said you were going to buy me a present," Malfoy said sulkily as he withdrew his hands, placing them back in his pockets as he turned to face his father.

"I said that I would buy you a racing broom," his father replied simply. Harry couldn't help but chuckle slightly at that comment; Malfoy claimed to have been flying for years, he'd practically flown circles around the Slytherin git his first time up in the air during their first flying lesson, and the guy *still* thought he could fly well?

Harry barely paid any attention to what the white-haired berk was saying- something about Malfoy thinking that the only reason Harry got on the team was because of his fame, regardless of the fact that Malfoy had *seen* how good Harry was for himself- as he crouched in silence, praying they wouldn't turn to look in his cabinet; the last thing he needed was to be discovered in this kind of condition.



As Harry peered out of the cabinet, a stooping man with hair almost as greasy as Snape's came out to the front desk of the shop, bowing slightly at Malfoy's father.

"Mr Malfoy, what a pleasure to see you again," he said; Harry hadn't known it was possible for a man to sound that oily without actually spitting the stuff out every time he talked. "Delighted... and young Master Malfoy, too; charmed to meet you. How may I be of assistance? I must show you, just in today, and very reasonably priced-

"I'm not buying today, Mr Borgin, but selling," Malfoy's father stated bluntly, the man's face falling as soon as the words were out of his mouth, but Mr. Malfoy barely appeared to notice as he took a roll of parchment out of his pocket and unravelled it for Mr Borgin to read. "You have heard, of course, that the Ministry is conducting more raids, and I have a few- ah- items at home that might embarrass me, if the Ministry were to call..."

"Surely they would not presume to search *you*, my lord?" Mr Borgin said, once again reminding Harry of a dog seeking permission to do... stuff... to its master's leg (He'd heard the phrase somewhere once and thought it fitted, although he wasn't entirely sure what it meant).

"I have not been visited yet," Mr Malfoy stated, his lip curled in a brief sneer. "The name Malfoy still commands a certain respect, yet the Ministry grows ever more meddlesome. There are rumors about a new Muggle Protection Act- no doubt that flea-bitten, Muggle-loving fool Arthur Weasley is behind it -"

Harry briefly fumed at that comment, but forced himself back to the more important issue at hand when he saw that Malfoy was rapidly approaching his hiding place. There was some momentary relief when Malfoy paused to ask about the withered hand- Harry was rather amused to learn that Hermione had apparently beaten Malfoy in every exam; he wouldn't mention it to her, of course, but it was still good to know-, but then he kept on drawing closer and closer to the cabinet... he was going to open it... Harry reached into his pocket to grip his wand...

“Done,” said Mr. Malfoy at the counter. “Come, Draco; we’re leaving.”

As the Malfoy’s departed the shop, Harry waited a few moments to allow Mr Borgin time to return to the back room where he’d been when he’d arrived, before he left the cabinet and headed for the door, clutching his damaged glasses to his face as he glanced around.

The street didn’t look any more appealing outside than it had when he was inside the shop; the entire street seemed to be made up entirely of shops devoted to the Dark Arts, with the one he’d just left- appropriately called Borgin & Burkes- looking like the largest, and other shop windows holding such things as shrunken heads and gigantic black spiders. Two shabby-looking wizards were watching him from the shadow of a doorway, muttering to each other, and a witch was approaching him holding what looked like a tray of human fingers.

Feeling jumpy, Harry set off, trying to hold his glasses on straight as he studied his surroundings while simultaneously sticking to the shadows as much as he could without making his actions obvious; he and Hermione had learned long ago that the best way to avoid the bullies who wanted to ‘get even with them’ for beating them in class was to avoid acting stealthy, because being too deliberately sneaky wouldn’t get you anywhere.

True, the acquisition of his invisibility cloak last Christmas had pretty much made this particular skill relatively obsolete at Hogwarts, but Harry liked to think he could still avoid people without it if he had to.

As he reached the end of the alley, glancing back briefly to make sure he hadn’t been followed- he briefly registered a large form that resembled Hagrid down the street, but didn’t bother to look too closely at it, he turned back to see where he was now, only to hear a voice call out his name from behind.

“Harry?” Jane Granger said, looking in surprise at her adopted son as he somewhat sheepishly turned around to look at her, a slightly awkward smile crossing his face as he looked at them. “What are you doing here *alone*?”

"Oh, Mum, Dad, hi," Harry said, waving slightly sheepishly at them as he spoke. "Uh... would you believe that I had a bit of a mix-up while travelling by magic and came out of the wrong fireplace to everybody else?"

"*Fireplace?*" Alan said, looking in confusion at his son. "What do you mean, you came out of the wrong *fireplace?*"

"Long story going nowhere; it's all kinda dumb anyway," Harry replied, trying not to think too much about it; he still wondered how mispronouncing 'Diagon Alley' had sent him to some place called *Knockturn Ally*. "I just need to find the Weasleys-"

"*Harry!*" a voice yelled from behind him. Turning around, Harry was just in time to see the large number of redheads heading towards him before he felt the increasingly familiar sensation of a hysterical brunette brainiac lunging for him and wrapping her arms around him as she yelled at him (It seemed like Hermione had been doing this at least once a month or so ever since they'd started Hogwarts).

"*Can you for ONCE try and stay SAFE, Harry?!*" Hermione yelled, her arms so tightly wrapped around Harry that he felt convinced something was going to break. "*I mean, GOD, only you could screw up just getting to the SHOPS!*"

"Hermione, do you mind *not* suffocating your brother?" Jane asked, unable to stop a slight smile crossing her lips as she looked at her daughter. "He's perfectly safe, and you're not helping anyone with that..."

"What... oh, uh... hi Mum," Hermione said, parting from Harry and waving slightly sheepishly at her mother before an apprehensive expression crossed her face. "Uh, look... about this whole thing with Harry getting lost... it really *wasn't* the Weasleys' fault..."

Alan only chuckled slightly as he placed a reassuring hand on his daughter's shoulder.

"Don't worry about it, Hermione; I get that we all make mistakes at time," he said, before he looked back up at Mrs Weasley and held out his hand. "Hi; I'm Alan Granger, Harry and Hermione's father."

"Molly Weasley," Mrs Weasley replied, smiling brightly back at him. "A pleasure to meet you at last; Harry and Hermione have both been absolutely *excellent* company to have around the house this last week or so."

"Glad to hear it," Alan replied, smiling briefly at his children before looking up at Mr Weasley. "That reminds me, I managed to track down the old instruction booklets for some of our equipment in the house; I thought you might be interested in reading them."

"Oh, thank *you*!" Mr Weasley smiled, grinning gratefully at Alan as he shook the dentist's hand before he noticed Harry's glasses. Reaching over, he picked them off Harry's face, tapped them once with his wand, and returned them to Harry as good as new.

"Where did you come out?" Ron asked.

"Some place called Knockturn Alley," Harry replied.

"*Brilliant!*" Fred breathed.

"Depends on your definition of 'brilliant'; having to avoid someone holding a tray full of fingers is *not* my idea of a good time..." Harry muttered, before he realised what he was saying and turned to look awkwardly at Alan. "And before you say anything, Dad, I was careful not to be seen, and I didn't buy *anything* that I shouldn't."

"Seeing that you didn't have *any* money that you could use here on you when you left home, that pretty much goes without saying," Alan said, chuckling slightly as he leaned over to ruffle Harry's hair slightly before he shrugged and looked back at Gringotts'. "Anyway, let's get going; the sooner you get your shopping done the better."

"Oh, that reminds me, talking of shopping, care to hear who I saw while I was *in* the alley," Harry said, looking over at the Weasleys with a slight smile. "Malfoy and Malfoy Senior, selling something in a shop called Borgin & Burkes."

"Selling, you say?" Mr Weasley said, looking over at Harry with a grim satisfaction on his face. "So, he's worried, is he? Oh, I'd love to get Lucius Malfoy for something..."

“You don’t want to obsess too much over it,” Mr Granger said, looking over at the other man as they entered Gringotts. “From what Harry’s old me about that family’s son, they sound like particularly bad news; I’m not saying you couldn’t handle them, but you don’t want to start anything until you *know* you can put something on him.”

“I know, I know...” Mr Weasley shook his head as they walked towards the carts that would take them to the vaults. “I can dream, though, can’t I?”

The journey to the vaults was enjoyable enough, but Harry greatly wished that he and the Grangers could have taken an alternative cart to the Weasleys after seeing their vault. The contents consisted of a small pile of silver sickles and just one gold galleon, with Mr Weasley practically falling into the corners of the vault before he emptied it. Harry and Hermione tried awkwardly to block the contents of Harry’s vault from the Weasleys’ view as they shoved a few handfuls of coins into a bag; the vault was large enough to contain more than enough money for both of them, but Harry didn’t exactly want to rub his financial status into his friend’s faces.

As they departed from Gringotts, after some quick arrangements to rendezvous at Flourish & Blotts to buy their schoolbooks in an hour, the group soon split up to attend to their shopping; Mr Weasley took the Grangers to the Leaky Cauldron for a drink to discuss the instruction manuals they’d brought him, Percy muttered about needing a new quill, the twins saw their schoolfriend Lee Jordan, and Mrs Weasley and Ginny were going to a second-hand robe shop. After purchasing some ice cream cones while walking along the street, Harry, Ron and Hermione spent the hour examining the various shops along the street, Hermione taking a few glances in the window of Magical Menagerie- she’d been thinking about a pet, but regular access to Hedwig meant that she didn’t feel that it would really be worth her time getting an owl- while Harry picked up a couple of pieces of spare Quidditch gear in case anything was damaged in their upcoming games when school started once again.

They briefly noted Fred, George and Lee examining a box of Dr. Filibuster’s Fabulous Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks in Gambol and Japes Wizarding Joke Shop– not wishing to fall victim to a prank of

some kind, the three younger children stayed out of sight of the twins- and Ron noted Percy studying a book in a junk shop that had a title mentioning something about 'later careers', but none of them wanted to get close enough to find out what it was about. Percy's seemingly overwhelming obsession with his studies was enough to put any of them off spending too much time with him; even Hermione found him slightly disconcerting, although she freely acknowledged to herself that it was mainly because of Harry convincing her to have a bit more fun growing up than she might have had otherwise.

After an hour or so of wandering, the three of them finally headed towards Flourish and Blotts, only to find, much to their surprise, that it was completely jam-packed, with a large crowd of people- including a surprising number of witches- straining to get in. For a moment, Harry was puzzled by this surge of behaviour- surely people couldn't *all* be getting their schoolbooks on this exact same day?- but then he saw the banner above the shop and he groaned in frustration.

GILDEROY	LOCKHART
will be signing copies of his	autobiography
MAGICAL	ME
Today 12:30 PM to 4:30 PM	

"We can actually *meet* him!" Hermione squealed, in a manner that was far too girlish for the Hermione Harry had grown up with. "I mean, he's written almost the whole booklist-"

"Which means he's a writer who's managed to get lucky with his novels; just because people buy a lot of his stuff is no indication of quality in my opinion," Harry retorted, glaring critically over at Hermione as he, her and Ron walked into the bookshop. "If nothing else, I'm not wild about his titles; they all sound kind of stupid to me."

Hermione seemed about to protest, but, after seeing their assorted families standing in the line already, they each just grabbed a copy of *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Two* and joined them in the queue.

"Oh, there you are, good," said Mrs. Weasley. She sounded breathless and kept patting her hair. "We'll be able to see him in a minute..."

Groaning slightly, and grateful that at least *his* mum and Ginny didn't seem as obsessed with this good-looking berk as Mrs Weasley and Hermione, Harry tried to hide himself behind some of the adults to avoid attracting too much attention to himself. He may not have even met Lockhart yet, but if the constant preening his photographs did was any indication, Harry could already guess that this man would do pretty much anything to improve his own position in society, and getting his picture taken with the 'Boy Who Lived' would definitely count for *something*...

The man's appearance at the end of the queue, sitting behind a table in robes of forget-me-not blue, did little to change Harry's opinion of the guy; if anything, he seemed *more* vain than he had earlier.

*I mean*, Harry groaned to himself as a reporter shoved past him, muttering something about having to take a picture for the *Daily Prophet*, *what is the point of having all those photos of himself around him? If he wants to look at himself why not just get a mirror and have it done with...*

"It *can't* be Harry Potter!" a voice suddenly yelled, breaking into Harry's train of thought. Glancing up, Harry only had just enough time to realise what had happened- Ron had been jolted to one side as the reporter pushed past him, leaving him in full view of Lockhart- before the man in question dived forward, grabbed his arm, and pulled him to the front, grinning broadly as further photographs were taken.

"Nice big smile, Harry," Lockhart said through his own gleaming teeth as he clasped Harry's hand in what was clearly intended to be a handshake if it weren't for Harry's lack of interest in ever coming into contact with this moron. "You and I together are worth-"

Harry didn't stop to think about it; exerting all the strength he could, he managed to break his hand free of Lockhart's grip as he dived towards the crowd only to realise that there was no space for him to get out. Laughing casually, as though this had all been pre-arranged, Lockhart stepped forward to pull Harry back, clasping his shoulder as though they were old friends.

“Ah, Harry; camera-shy as ever, eh?” he said, shaking his head slightly as he stage-whispered at the boy. “Don’t worry; you get used to it.”

Personally, Harry doubted this man had ever *been* camera-shy in the first place, but he was prevented from voicing his thoughts as Lockhart turned to address the shopful of people before him.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said loudly, waving for quiet. “What an extraordinary moment this is! The perfect moment for me to make a little announcement I’ve been sitting on for some time!”

Harry’s eyes widened in horror as he spoke, the full implications of the book list only now settling in.

It may have been possible for the new Defence Against the Dark Arts to have assigned Lockhart’s books to the list because she was a fan of his work, but there was one option that Harry hadn’t considered...

“When young Harry here stepped into Flourish and Blotts today, he only wanted to buy my autobiography- which I shall be happy to present him now, free of charge-” The crowd applauded again, ignorant of the increasingly shocked expression on Harry’s face. “He had no *idea*,” Lockhart continued, giving Harry a little shake that made his glasses slip to the end of his nose, “that he would shortly be getting much, much more than my book, *Magical Me*. He and his schoolmates will, in fact, be getting the real magical me. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure and pride in announcing that this September, I will be taking up the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!”

If it hadn’t been for the fact that his parents were in front of him, Harry was certain he would have sworn at that comment.

*This* berk was going to be teaching Defence? He’d have almost preferred Quirrell to this guy. The man may have had Voldemort sticking out of the back of his head, but at least he’d actually given the sense of having some kind of respect for the severity of his subject; this guy seemed to be concerned with nothing more than selling his crap to as many people as possible. He barely even cared about the fact that he got practically every single book on the list free



as Lockhart dropped them into his hands; biting his lip to avoid himself ranting at the man for taking every available opportunity to sell off a bunch of his books just to improve his own sales, as he hurried away from the man, finally spotting Ginny standing alone at one end of the shop- she must have become separated from the rest of her family- and walked over to join her.

"You have these," he said to Ginny, tipping the books into her cauldron; he may not have paid for them himself, but he got the impression that, as the youngest, she didn't get many things just for her, and he wanted her to have something new before she went to Hogwarts. "I'll buy my own..."

"Bet you loved *that*, didn't you, Potter?" a voice suddenly said from behind them.

"Oh, *God*..." Harry groaned, as he turned to glare at the approaching Malfoy, once again swaggering like he owned the place.

"*Famous* Harry Potter," he chuckled, smirking at Harry. "Can't even walk into a *book* shop without making the front page!"

"Leave him alone, he didn't want any of that!" Ginny yelled; Harry blinked in surprise as he realised she'd just spoken in front of him for the first time.

"Potter, you've got yourself a *girlfriend*!" Malfoy drawled, prompting Ginny to turn scarlet.

"You're pathetic, you know that Malfoy?" Harry retorted, trying not to pay too much attention to Ginny's blush; he wasn't sure how to deal with that right now, and didn't want to start thinking about it just yet until he had a clearer idea in his head as to how he should handle it. "I mean, if you're jealous, you could just come out and say so rather than trying to make fun of everything I've got that you haven't..."

Malfoy went scarlet as he suddenly reached into his robes.

"Just *try* it, Malfoy!" Ron hissed; he and Hermione had come up behind Harry and Ginny while they were talking to the ferret look-a-like in front of them. Harry could only hope Hermione hadn't heard all

the details of his retort to Malfoy; the last thing he wanted was to give his sister *more* ammunition to tease him with...

"I have to admit, it's a bit surprising seeing *you* around here," Hermione stated, folding her arms as she glared at Malfoy with an expression that you'd normally expect to see on the face of someone who'd found a piece of dog's mess on their shoes. "I wouldn't have thought you'd have wanted to 'mingle with the commoners'."

"Not half as surprised as I am to see the Weasleys in a shop," Malfoy retorted, smirking over at Ginny and Ron as he spoke. "I expect your parents will go hungry for a month paying that-

"If it's a choice between being a rich git and being a poor person who actually cares about somebody, I think I'd prefer being poor," Harry retorted, joining his sister as he glared at Malfoy. "At least I'd know people actually gave a damn about me, rather than just wanting to scrounge off my money; where it *counts*, the Weasleys are richer than you'll ever be."

"Agreed," Hermione said, trying to ignore the appreciative glances from Ron and Ginny at Harry's last statement, as the rest of their group moved to join them. "Now then, let's just get out of here before this-

"Well well well- Arthur Weasley."

Harry nearly swore once again as Lucius Malfoy came up behind his son, Harry only now registering that both sets of parents had just joined them; this was *not* a confrontation he'd been looking forward to.

"Lucius," Mr Weasley said, nodding coldly at the man before him.

"Oh, so *you're* the father of that 'Malfoy' boy I've heard so much about?" Alan added, folding his arms as he stood beside his new friend and stared at the wizard before him; to his credit, he appeared unintimidated at the prospect of facing a real wizard.

"Indeed," Mr Malfoy replied simply, before he turned back to Mr Weasley as though Alan was completely beneath his notice. "Busy

time at the Ministry recently, I hear. All those raids... I hope they're paying you overtime."

Reaching into Ginny's cauldron, he pulled out a tattered copy of *A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration* and studied it scornfully.

"Obviously not," he said, shaking his head as he studied it. "Dear dear; what's the point of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don't even pay you well for it?"

"We have a different idea of what disgraces the name of wizard, Malfoy," Mr Weasley retorted.

"Clearly," said Mr. Malfoy, his pale eyes straying to Alan and Jane, both of whom were staring resolutely at the man before them; after everything Harry and Hermione had told them about Malfoy, neither of their parents were willing to back down to someone whose only achievement as a parent seemed to have been a brat. "The company you keep, Weasley...and I thought your family could sink no lower."

Mr Weasley suddenly leapt forward, knocking Mr Malfoy to the ground and sending Ginny's cauldron flying. Malfoy moved as though he was going to pull out his wand, but, recalling a move he'd seen in a film once, Harry stuck out his leg and lashed out with a brief kick at Malfoy's foot, sending his school rival crashing to the ground in a heap. Harry vaguely registered calls of encouragement from the twins and please from Mrs Weasley for Mr Weasley to stop, but then a loud voice broke out over the din that Harry recognised all too well.

"Break it up, gents, break it up!" Hagrid's booming voice yelled as the gamekeeper strode forward, pulling Mr Malfoy and Mr Weasley apart; Harry was pleased to note that Mr Weasley came away with only a cut lip while Mr Malfoy's right eye appeared to have been hit by the *Encyclopedia of Toadstools*. Fuming, Mr Malfoy tossed Ginny's Transfiguration book at her, muttering something about it being the best her father had to offer her before he walked out of the shop, leaving Malfoy to pick himself up and hurry after his father.

"Pathetic as always, huh?" Harry chuckled, jerking his thumb after Malfoy as he glanced over at Ron. "Goes on and on about his

superiority, but kick him once and stop him using a wand and he's as good as useless."

"I hope you don't *always* use physical means to solve your problems," Jane put in, looking critically down at her son as Mrs Weasley helped her husband back onto his feet. "You know how your father and I feel about that..."

"Don't worry, Mum; any time Harry's hit the guy, it was to stop the guy hitting *him* first," Hermione said, smiling reassuringly at her mother.

"Hermione may have a point about the kid, but yeh still should've ignored the father, Arthur," Hagrid said, almost lifting Mr. Weasley off his feet as he straightened his robes before looking over at the Grangers. "Don't worry 'bout them, Mr Granger; rotten ter the core, the whole family, everyone knows that- no Malfoy's worth listenin' ter- bad blood, that's what it is."

"If they're as obsessed with blood purity as I've heard, I can believe it," Alan mused, shaking his head slightly as he looked after Malfoy. "I'm surprised he doesn't look more ridiculous than he does; from what Hermione's told us about the blood purity obsession in the wizarding world, I would have thought that pure-blood wizards would be so close to extinction that inbreeding would have caused more serious genetic defects..."

"Eh, look at it this way; either he'll have to betray his principles, or his kid'll be so screwed up the line'll probably end there," Harry said, smiling slightly to show that he was joking (It was only a partial joke, but a joke nevertheless) as they walked out of the shop.

"Anyway," he said, as he turned to look back at the Weasleys with a slight smile, "Hermione and I'd best be off; we'll see you at King's Cross in a week or two, OK?"

## Chapter 4 – An Unusual Arrival

After the intriguing first-hand look at daily life in a wizarding household, Harry and Hermione initially found it slightly hard to settle back into a routine that didn't incorporate some of the elements of the magical world, such as dishes that washed themselves once you'd eaten from them. However, their 'discomfort' only lasted for a few hours on the first day; once that was past, they easily settled back into their regular routines at home, checking over their schoolbooks and preparing for their lessons.

It barely seemed like a week had passed when the day that school would start again at last came about. With everything having been packed away in their trunks the night before, the morning's only real concern was to get everything in the car and get down to King's Cross in time to meet up with the Weasleys.

As it turned out, however, the Weasleys ended up being remarkably later than any of them had expected; the Grangers had arrived at Kings' Cross with over half an hour to spare, but subsequently spent most of that time waiting for the Weasleys to actually show up, sitting in a bench by platform nine and trying to avoid the glances of any of the wizarding families that passed them by. Finally, the Weasleys arrived, prompting a relieved sigh from Harry and Hermione as the two of them stood up and walked over to join their friends.

"Oh, you're just here?" Mrs Weasley said, looking in surprise at the Grangers. "I would have thought you'd have gone on in already."

"Well, we would have, but these two wanted to wait for you all," Alan said by way of explanation, smiling slightly at his children.

"Eh, y'know, these carriages tend to get a bit dull with nobody but the bookworm to talk to..." Harry shrugged, earning himself a light poke in the shoulder from Hermione in the process.

"*I'm* the bookworm?" she said, looking teasingly at him. "*You're* just as education-focused as I am, you know!"

“Yes, but you started doing all that reading when you were old enough to understand that the black squiggles in books were actually words; that’s not *quite* the same thing as me,” Harry pointed out, smiling affectionately over at his sister as he rolled his eyes before looking back at the Weasleys. “Anyway, let’s just get onto the station, OK? We’ve only got a few minutes left.”

“Right then,” Alan said, as he looked up at Mr Weasley, “let’s get them onto the platform; we can talk more later.”

“Agreed,” Mr Weasley said, nodding in confirmation as he turned to look at his children. “Percy, you and I will go first; Mr and Mrs Granger, you can take Hermione next; Fred, George, Ron, you go after them; and Harry, Ginny and Molly can follow afterwards.”

Harry momentarily thought about protesting to the arrangements- he’d prefer to have gone on first and picked out a carriage with the others straight away-, but, if it meant the chance to talk a bit more with Ginny and try and encourage her to stop doing mouse impressions when he was around, he supposed that he could deal with it...

And he had *no* idea where that thought had come from, and he was *definitely* not going to mention it to Hermione.

As Percy and Mr Weasley walked casually through the barrier, Harry moved to the back of the makeshift ‘queue’ they’d formed after the order of entry had been sorted out, and smiled at Ginny.

“So,” he said, looking casually at the red-haired girl beside him, “anything in particular that you’re looking forward to when you get to Hogwarts?”

Looking up at him as though she couldn’t believe he’d just spoken to her, Ginny looked for a moment as though she was about to bolt, but, after a moment of uncertainty, she swallowed and spoke.

“Well... quidditch...” she said, blushing slightly as she tried to avoid looking at him as her father and brother walked through the barrier before them. “And... well, Transfiguration...”

"Yeah, and History of Magic has its merits," Harry chuckled, leaning in to whisper his next tip into her ear as Hermione and his parents went through the barrier. "Don't tell Hermione I told you this, but it's brilliant for catching up any sleep you've missed in the last nights, and Professor Binns doesn't care about it."

Ginny raised her hand to her mouth to stifle a slight giggle at that thought as Ron and the twins walked through the barrier once again. Glancing up at the clock, Harry smiled slightly in relief; they still had a couple of minutes before the train was due to depart, even if it did look like they were the last ones on the train judging by the lack of anyone from Hogwarts around them.

"Right then," Mrs Weasley said, looking over at the children just as Ginny was about to respond to Harry's last comment, "time we were off, dears; we've only got a few minutes."

Making sure that Hedwig's cage was correctly positioned on top of his luggage, Harry turned his luggage trolley towards the barrier in front of him, bent low over the handlebars, and glanced over at Ginny to confirm that she was ready beside him before the two of them began to purposefully walk towards the barrier, breaking into a run in the last few moments-

Only to crash into the wall as though it was nothing more than a conventional wall?

OK, Harry mused to himself, glancing anxiously at his watch as Ginny turned to look concernedly at her mother, *I don't know much about this part of Hogwarts, but I do know that the barrier closing like that can't be a good thing...*

"Wh-what happened?" Ginny said, looking anxiously at her mother. "I-I'm going to miss the train-"

"Now, don't panic, dear," Mrs Weasley said, as she looked sternly between her daughter and Harry, "I'll try and contact Dumbledore; you two just wait here, understood?"

With that, she hurried off down the platform, evidently intending to find a private location to send a message to the headmaster, leaving

the two children to wait outside the barrier. After a moment's silence, during which Ginny leaned against the barrier as though she was trying to push the pillar over, Harry finally decided to break the quiet and looked inquiringly at her.

"So," he asked, trying to sound as though nothing was wrong, "assuming your mum's strategy doesn't work out, do you have any other ideas how we'd get there?"

Unfortunately, this latest incident appeared to have sent Ginny back somewhat in terms of the progress she'd made in talking to Harry; whether it was because she was embarrassed at the recent incident or something else, Harry wasn't sure, but she just squeaked in embarrassment and began studying the barrier with intense interest.

Finally, after a few moments of inactivity- Harry didn't feel like trying to talk to Ginny again to give her some time to get her composure back and Ginny just didn't seem to want to say anything-, Mrs Weasley finally came back, smiling casually at the two of them.

"Well, I flooed Dumbledore and he said the two of you can floo straight to his office from the Burrow," she said, smiling reassuringly at them. "Just hold on to me and we'll apparate back there."

"Wait; apparate?" Harry said, looking inquiringly at her. "As in... just travelling back there by magic?"

"Of course; what else?" Mrs Weasley replied, smiling over at him. "Arthur and I don't do it normally, of course- with so many children it would be difficult at the best of times, to say nothing of where he'd apparate to once we got here-, but getting back home from here's easy enough. Professor Dumbledore will be able to deal with whatever's wrong with the barrier easily enough, but for the moment he thinks it's best that you two get to Hogwarts as soon as possible."

"Uh... great," Harry said, smiling slightly awkwardly at her as he and Ginny grabbed their suitcases. On the one hand, it would be great to be back at Hogwarts early, but on the other hand, being there with only Ginny for company could make things a bit... uncomfortable, for lack of a better term... if her current attitude towards him was any indication.



Still, if it meant getting to school *without* having to risk detention at least and expulsion at worst, he supposed he could cope with a few hours of discomfort.

“Right then,” Mrs Weasley said, glancing around King’s Cross briefly before her eyes settled on the entrance. “Just follow me and keep a hold of everything; we can probably get back in one go, but the tighter a hold you have on your things the better.”

Nodding in understanding, the two children took a hold of Mrs Weasley’s offered hands while trying to maintain a grip on their suitcases- Harry knew he’d have to make it up to Hedwig for his somewhat rough treatment of her while carrying her cage under his arm-, and hurried out to stand in a conveniently concealed corner in the station.

“Got everything?” Mrs Weasley asked, glancing down at the two children with a reassuring smile. “Good; now, hold on...”

There was a sudden blackness, and Harry suddenly felt as though he was being pressed on very hard from all directions, his eyes being pressed into his skull, his eardrums felt like they were about to burst, his chest had iron bands around it-

Then, almost as soon as it had begun, Harry was once again gasping for air, standing outside the Burrow with Ginny and Mrs Weasley, their luggage still in his and Ginny’s hands, although Hedwig was looking increasingly flustered at all this rough treatment.

Having apparated for the first time in his life, Harry could easily see why the Weasleys didn’t just take their children to the Express that way; it definitely wasn’t going to be his favourite means of transport any time soon.

“Right then,” Mrs Weasley said, hurrying the two of them into the Burrow’s kitchen, “you two just take the floo powder and head to Professor Dumbledore’s office; he said he’d go to King’s Cross to see what had happened to the barrier as soon as you two were in. Harry, you’re to keep an eye on Ginny and make sure she stays out of trouble until the other first-years arrive; she’ll be sorted with them, but

Dumbledore doesn't want her going into any house dormitories until she actually has a house."

"Uh... OK," Harry said, nodding slightly at Mrs Weasley as he and Ginny carried their bags into the kitchen. "You'll let Mum and Dad know what happened when they get out of the platform, right?"

"Of course," Mrs Weasley said, smiling affectionately at him. As she went to collect the pot of floo powder- restocked since the last visit to Diagon Alley-, Harry made a mental note to try and find somewhere in the castle that Snape wouldn't think to look for the two of them; the last thing he needed on his plate right now was the sour Potions master showing up while they were waiting for everyone else to arrive and making Ginny even *more* uncomfortable than she already was.

As they reached the fireplace, however, Harry pushed such thoughts out of his mind to focus on the main issue at hand. Taking a handful of the powder, he threw it into the fire, smiled slightly as the green flame appeared- floo powder wasn't the most pleasant means of travel Harry had encountered, but he *did* like the effect it created in the fireplace-, stepped into the fire, called out "Hogwarts!"...

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A few seconds later, he found himself tumbling to the floor in a large room that Harry could only assume was Professor Dumbledore's office. Having put his luggage down and opened Hedwig's cage, allowing the owl to fly out of a nearby window and head for the owlery after shooting a disgruntled look back at him, Harry allowed himself a few moments to look around the office he had found himself in.

The room was large and circular, full of funny little noises that presumably originated from the various unusual silver instruments standing around on spindle-legged tables, whirring and emitting little puffs of smoke. The walls were covered with portraits of wizards that Harry assumed were old headmasters and headmistresses, all currently snoozing gently in their frames. There was also an enormous, claw-footed desk, the Sorting Hat located amid the shelves of books behind it, and-

Before he could take in any more, there was another brief blaze behind him, and Ginny stumbled out of the fireplace, nearly colliding with his own luggage before he managed to grab her and stop her hitting anything.

"Ah, you're here," Professor Dumbledore's voice said from off to the side, prompting Harry to rapidly release his hold on Ginny before the two of them turned to look in the direction of the voice, to see Dumbledore walking down from an upper part of the office. "I understand that the barrier refused to work for you when you, Miss Weasley and Mrs Weasley tried to use it, despite it having proven successful for your families mere moments previously?"

"Uh... yeah, that's as much as I know," Harry said, nodding slightly at the headmaster as he and Ginny moved to pick up their luggage. "Sorry I can't be more help..."

"Think nothing of it, Harry," Dumbledore assured him, smiling slightly at the two children before him. "After all, if life did not still have some surprises to show me at my age, the world would be a dull place indeed. You two simply leave your luggage here and head down to the library or the main hall, according to your preference; your cases will be taken to your dorms after the Sorting Ceremony. I will head to King's Cross and see what can be done about this barrier that has been placed around the entrance to the platform."

"Uh, Professor-" Harry began, only for Dumbledore to nod in confirmation at him.

"I assure you, Harry, I will let your parents know what happened to you as soon as I can," he said, as he turned and headed for the stairs. "I shall see you both at the Sorting Feast... and Miss Weasley?" he added, turning back to smile slightly at Ginny. "Welcome to your first year at Hogwarts."

As Dumbledore departed down the stairs, Harry shrugged and turned back to look at Ginny, who was once again making a concentrated effort to show a significant interest in the floor rather than him.

"OK," he said after a moment's pause, having established that she definitely wasn't going to break the silence on her own, "we've got a

few hours until anybody's meant to show up, and I'm not sure where Hagrid's going to be given all that he's probably got to deal with at the moment, so... is there anything you'd like to see while we're here?"

For a moment, there was silence, and then Ginny mumbled something under her breath that sounded a bit like 'Quidditch'.

"Quidditch?" Harry repeated, looking inquiringly at her. "Uh... you want to go to the Quidditch pitch for a bit?" (He really wished she'd speak; he hated talking to her like she was an idiot or a little child, but he needed to clarify what she was saying and she wasn't making it easy for him to do that.)

After a moment where Ginny seemed to turn an even brighter shade of red, she nodded slightly.

"OK then," Harry said, indicating his luggage, "I'll get my broom, we'll get some lunch, and then we can see about getting one of the school brooms for you; sound fine?"

At that, Ginny looked up.

"I get to fly too?" she said softly.

"Uh... sure," Harry said, looking in slight surprise at her. "What; did you think I'd just take you there and fly myself? You've been around Fred, George and Charlie for most of your life, and they're all good fliers from what I've heard; I figured that you'd had some practice... right?"

After another moment's silence, Ginny nodded.

"Yeah... I spent most of my nights back home since I was six going into the broomshed to fly around," she said, trying not to look too much at Harry as she awkwardly studied her feet. "If you'd rather I just stay on the ground..."

"What, and fly around on my *own*?" Harry said, smiling at her; at least *this* might help him get through her self-erected shell. "Not a chance; if you know what to do, you're coming up with me, OK?"

Looking back at him, Ginny smiled uncertainly and nodded.

"Great," Harry said, indicating the doorway to Dumbledore's office. "Let's go; I'll be right behind you."

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A few hours later, lunch having been eaten- which had been more filling than most meals Harry had normally had in Hogwarts, most likely because it had only been the two of them this time around to provide food for-, Harry and Ginny landed after their flying session, the two of them laughing together as they came down to the ground once again.

"Wow..." Harry said, looking back at the sky above them before he turned back to look at Ginny. "You were *great* up there, you know!"

"Really?" Ginny said, looking over in surprise at Harry. "Y-you mean that?"

"Of course," Harry said, smiling back at her. "Seriously, your practice back home definitely paid off; when you become old enough, you should try out for the team if there's a spot available."

"I'll... well, I'll remember that," Ginny said, smiling slightly back at him before her face fell suddenly.

"What?" Harry asked, looking anxiously at her as he noticed her change of expression. "Something wrong?"

"Nothing," Ginny said, her voice suddenly subdued as she turned away and glanced at her watch. "I think the Express'll be arriving in a few minutes; I'd better go and ask Professor McGonnagall where I wait."

"Ginny, don't change the subject," Harry said, looking inquiringly at her. "What did I say-?"

"*Nothing*," Ginny said, before she ran off, leaving Harry staring bemusedly after her for a moment before he thought back over what he'd said and inspiration struck him.

*Nuts...* he groaned to himself, as he picked up his broom and began to head towards Gryffindor Tower to leave his broom in his dorm. *I had to mention the team, didn't I... the team she's not even going to have the chance to join for another four years...*

Since Harry doubted Ginny had any interest in playing Keeper- she didn't strike him as having the right build for that kind of role-, that meant she'd have to wait around four years to be in for a chance at having *any* kind of role on the team...

*Which, for her, Harry groaned in his mind, is probably just a reminder of another way where I'm unique; I was the youngest Seeker in a century and I got the position without even trying, while she's going to have to work for it...*

It seemed that even when he was trying to *comfort* her, he ended up making a mess of things.

For once- just *once*-, he'd like to be able to get through a day in the wizarding world without his 'celebrity status' being rubbed in his face...

Resolving to try and figure out a way to assure Ginny that he didn't think of her as a little girl- she was really rather fun to spend time with, as far as he was concerned-, Harry hurried towards the Gryffindor portrait hole as fast as he could. By his estimation, he had about forty minutes or so to leave his broom there and get back down to the great hall before the others arrived (He was hopeful that either the password would have remained the same from last year or that the Fat Lady would tell him the new password as the first student there).

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Having deposited his broom by his bed- the password had been changed, but the Fat Lady had told him the new one willingly enough- Harry had no sooner sat down in the Great Hall- trying to ignore Snape's glare in his direction; he wouldn't put it past the Potions Master to assume that Harry had blocked the barrier himself just so he could have an excuse to get to Hogwarts early- than the main door opened and the rest of the students poured into the hall. Turning around, he smiled slightly as he saw Ron and Hermione at the front

of the group, the two of them instantly heading to sit on either side of him.

“What *happened* to you?” Hermione asked, looking in frustration at him. “Mum and Dad were so *worried* when you didn’t show up; they only let *me* get on the train because they didn’t want us *both* to miss school...”

“Trust me,” Harry said as he looked back at her, “if I knew what had happened back there, I’d tell you; all I know is that the barrier was blocked when Ginny and I tried it, so we ended up flooing to Dumbledore’s office and spending some time milling around here until you showed up and she went to join the other first years.”

“‘Milling about’?” Ron said sharply, looking at Harry with a warning glare. “What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, you know,” Harry said, trying to sound nonchalant, “looking over some stuff in the library, showing her around the castle...”

He shrugged dismissively. “Stuff like that, you know; nothing major.”

Ron nodded slightly as he turned back to look at the staff table, the Sorting Hat now positioned in front of it, but Harry knew Ron too well to believe that this particular conversation was over that easily. However, further thought was put aside for the moment as the Hat opened its ‘mouth’- as Harry thought of the large rip at the bottom of the Hat as- and began to sing.

*The hall is lit with candles tall.*

*The year, it has turned.*

*The leaves are changing, soon to fall.*

*The students have returned.*

*New faces peer, full of fright.*

*How shall we sort you out?*

*Time to choose, get it right  
I'll see smiles, nary a pout.  
Fair Ravenclaw, a clever lot,  
Have minds honed and sharp.  
Those Slytherin have clever plots,  
Tuned to ambition, played like a harp.  
Oh Hufflepuff, steadfast and true  
They never carp, hard workers all.  
Gryffindor, the courageous few-  
Against their foes, they never fall.  
As a thinking cap, I am no fool.  
I'll see your place, your proper nook.  
The founder's helper, Godric's tool,  
Put me on, I'll have a look.*

As the song ended, the students burst into polite applause, which ended as Professor McGonagall began to read out the names of the students to be sorted. Harry barely even paid much attention to the other students, simply clapping on almost automatic whenever he heard 'Gryffindor' being yelled out, his eyes and ears constantly alert for any sign of Ginny. The closest he came to being distracted was when a small, mousey-haired boy made a beeline for the seat between him and Hermione; Harry had to politely explain to the boy that he was saving it for a friend and wave him on to another part of the table, trying to ignore the gaze of almost hero-worship on the boy's face as he looked back at Harry.

Finally, when Ginny's name was called and she sat under the hat, Harry allowed himself a relieved smile as the hat called out



“GRYFFINDOR!”; he’d been fairly confident that she’d end up there based on what he’d seen of her personality, but at the same time he’d been worried that her ‘panic attacks’- for lack of a better term for how she’d reacted around him- could have affected her chances.

After the last new student had been sorted, Dumbledore stood up and smiled out at them.

“And welcome to another year at Hogwarts!” he said, smiling out at the students. “There is a time for speech-making, but this is not yet it! Please, tuck in!”

Over the course of the meal, Harry took the opportunity to catch up with some of the other students about what they’d done over the summer, their tales ranging from Neville gathering some new plants for his grandmother’s greenhouse to Seamus Finnigan having spent his holiday in America; all interesting, but nothing particularly noteworthy.

Not that Harry minded about a lack of excitement, of course; as far as he was concerned, having taken on Voldemort last year and lived to talk about it, he would be perfectly happy to have a quiet, normal school year this time around.

After the last of the students had finished their food, Dumbledore stood up, instantly silencing the gossip around him.

“Now then,” he said, smiling around at the students, “with us all satisfied from that excellent dinner, I have a few announcements to make. Firstly, first year students- and some of our older ones, of course- should note that the Forbidden Forest is precisely that. Also, I would like to take this opportunity to announce that the position of the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor this year will be filled by the extremely well-known Gilderoy Lockhart, who I am sure you will all show a very warm welcome to.”

As the students- primarily the female ones- applauded Lockhart, the new professor stood up and waved politely at the students, smiling broadly at them as he did so, attracting several sighs from the girls at the tables. Looking over to his left, Harry couldn’t stop himself from

wincing slightly at the sickening way his sister was gazing in Lockhart's direction.

Sending up a brief mental prayer to hope that something would happen that would give him the opportunity to knock some sense into Hermione about that prick, but knowing that he couldn't do anything about it for the moment- like him, it took a while for Hermione to realise that she was wrong about something-, Harry turned away from his sister as the tables stood up and began to leave the great hall, both to avoid seeing that 'look' on her face longer than he had to and give him some time to try and come up with ideas to make her see sense.

Even as he began to walk back towards his dorms, making a mental note to send a letter to his parents the next morning to make sure that they knew what had happened to him, he couldn't stop himself from hoping that, whatever was going to happen to Lockhart to make Hermione see what an *idiot* the guy was, it happened sooner rather than later.

He respected his sister's right to make her own decisions, but, as her brother, Harry also reserved the right to make her see sense as soon as possible before she made an idiot of herself.

## Chapter 5 – Class with Gilderoy Lockhart

The next morning, despite the slight handicap of having been unable to apologise to Ginny about his slip up the previous evening- she seemed to be making a serious effort to avoid him, presumably out of embarrassment-, Harry had to admit that the year seemed to be off to a good start. Having had breakfast and been given his class schedule, he, Ron and Hermione found themselves heading down to the greenhouses to begin their first lesson of the second year. The fact that they'd moved to Greenhouse Three as opposed to Greenhouse One- which they'd used for almost all of their first year- was the most immediate clue that something new was going to take place this year, a theory that was only confirmed when, upon entering the greenhouse, Harry noted the large box of earmuffs in the middle of the room, in front of the trestle bench that Professor Sprout was standing behind.

"Right then," Professor Sprout said, as the class took their seats, "We'll be repotting Mandrakes today. Now, who can tell me the properties of the Mandrake?"

After a momentary glance between the two of them, Harry's hand went up in the air first, followed closely by Hermione's; on occasions where both of them knew that they knew the answer to a given question, they both tended to raise their hands in a pre-decided order to give each of them an equal chance to answer questions, and this time it was Harry's turn to go first.

"Yes, Mr Potter?" Professor Sprout said, looking inquiringly at him.

"Mandrake- I think it's also known as Mandragora, right?" Harry said, pausing briefly to allow Professor Sprout to nod in confirmation before he continued. "It's a powerful restorative, commonly used to return people who have been transfigured or cursed to their original state."

"Precisely. Take ten points for Gryffindor," Professor Sprout said, nodding in approval at Harry. "The Mandrake forms an essential part of most antidotes, but it is also dangerous; can anyone tell me why?"

This time it was Hermione's turn to put her hand up.

"The cry of the mandrake is fatal to anyone who hears it," she clarified.

"Exactly. Another ten points to Gryffindor," said Professor Sprout. "Now, the Mandrakes we have here are still very young."

As she indicated the purplish-green plants that were all that was currently visible of the mandrakes, Harry couldn't stop himself from smiling slightly at the confused expression on Ron's face; evidently he was wondering what Hermione had meant by the 'cry of the mandrake' comment.

"Everyone take a pair of earmuffs," Professor Sprout said, looking authoritatively around at the class. "As these mandrakes are only seedlings, their cries won't kill yet, but their cries can knock you out for several hours, so keep your earmuffs on when you're re-potting them, understand? Everyone get your earmuffs on and I'll demonstrate the proper procedure; do *not* remove the earmuffs until I say so."

As the students pulled the earmuffs on, Sprout, having made sure everybody was wearing them, pulled the first mandrake out of the pot, revealing the infant-like, pale green, mottled-skinned-form of the mandrake as opposed to the roots that would have been expected from a conventional plant, clearly screaming in rage as Professor Sprout forced the creature back into another pot before indicating for the class to remove their earmuffs.

"Now then," she said, looking around at the class, "four to a tray to begin re-potting the mandrakes, and ensure your earmuffs are secure before you begin; I will attract your attention when it's time to pack up. There is a large supply of pots here, compost in the sacks over there, and be careful of the Venemous Tentacula, it's teething."

After the tables had divided up into their various groups and the compost and pots had been gathered together, Harry was only slightly surprised to register the presence of a curly-haired Hufflepuff boy at the table; they'd never worked in anything larger than threes last year, so he hadn't fully registered the fact that there'd be someone outside their 'Trio' at their table.

“Justin Finch-Fletchley,” the boy said, smiling and holding out a hand to Harry’s as he registered the other boy’s inquiring gaze. “Know who you are, of course, the famous Harry Potter... and you’re his adopted sister Hermione, pretty much always top in everything,” (Hermione looked as though she wasn’t sure whether to be proud at the compliment or annoyed at being referred to as ‘Harry Potter’s sister’), “and you’re Ron Weasley; your brothers are on the quidditch team, aren’t they?”

For a moment, Harry felt almost relaxed talking to this guy, but then the next words out of his mouth automatically lowered Harry’s opinion of him.

“That Lockhart’s something, isn’t he?” the Hufflepuff said happily, as the group began to filling their plant pots with dragon dung compost. “Awfully brave chap. Have you read his books? I’d have died of fear if I’d been cornered in a telephone booth by a werewolf, but he stayed cool and- zap- just *fantastic*. My name was down for Eton, you know. I can’t tell you how glad I am I came here instead. Of course, Mother was slightly disappointed, but since I made her read Lockhart’s books I think she’s begun to see how useful it’ll be to have a fully trained wizard in the family-”

“Can we just get on with this?” Harry said impatiently, as he snapped his earmuffs on, ending the conversation. He knew it wasn’t exactly polite, but if he had to listen to this guy praise Lockhart’s name any more, he might punch something in frustration.

The class almost succeeded in making him want to punch something on its own, though. The mandrakes were easily some of the most frustrating plants Harry had ever worked with; they didn’t want to come out of the pots, but they seemed equally reluctant to go back into them afterwards. Harry spent around ten minutes trying to cram a particularly fat one into a pot as it kicked, bit and silently yelled in protest. He’d never been more grateful to get out of the greenhouses and back to the castle for Transfiguration.

In many ways, this class was simultaneously easier and harder than the herbology class. The work was harder in principle, of course, but after all the time he and Hermione had managed to talk about their

work over the holiday, they'd managed to keep their memories refreshed on the theory even if they couldn't do the practical without the Ministry coming down on them like a ton of bricks. Thanks to all their study of their books, Harry and Hermione had managed to maintain a decent grasp of the practical aspects of the course, and, with a bit of advice from the two of them, Ron was soon doing almost as well as they were. True, he only managed to produce a couple of buttons as opposed to Hermione and Harry- Harry was sure he and his sister could have replaced the buttons on a coat each with the amount they'd managed to whip up- but he still did fairly well.

Despite that, Harry was still grateful to get out of the classroom and get back to the great hall for lunch; after that kind of lesson, he *really* needed a chance to get his breath back before the next class...

Glancing at his timetable and noting that it was Defence Against the Dark Arts, Harry wasn't sure whether he should be frustrated at having to deal with the walking fraud that called himself a professor or grateful that he was going to get an opportunity to try and find some evidence that the man was a fraud this early in the year. It wasn't that he doubted his belief that the guy was lying- after checking over his books, Harry was pretty confident that some of the dates for Lockhart's escapades overlapped; there was no way he could have tackled the Yeti *and* those banshees within a few days of each other, given how much time he'd allegedly spent 'researching' the origins of the local banshee-, but it was more that he wasn't sure how long it would take for the guy to be revealed as the fake he was. After all, if he'd managed to attract *that* much publicity, it was possible that the sheer amount of information in his books- coupled with his face winning over at least a significant portion of the female population- had limited the possibility of anyone seeing through his charade up until now; if he just stuck to talking about the information in the books, it could take ages for him to make a mistake.

Of course, there *was* also the possibility that he'd try something that he *couldn't* handle and have to try and cover up for his blunder, but Harry doubted even Lockhart would try to start something he knew he couldn't handle on his first day. *He* may have been convinced the man was lying about his accomplishments, but he freely admitted that his attitude was mainly because he hadn't liked the guy to begin with;

if Lockhart was a fraud and had made it this far without being exposed, the guy would probably be careful not to give away the truth about himself by causing a situation he couldn't handle personally.

As he finally arrived at the great hall, Harry pushed those thoughts to the side and began to get some lunch together; he'd worry about Lockhart when he was in the guy's classroom and not before.

OK, so it still made him feel slightly sick to see that his sister had outlined Lockhart's lessons in little hearts- he'd thought that Hermione would be more *mature* than that- but he could put it aside for the moment...

Then, of course, while he was waiting for his next class to start, something happened that he'd been hoping to avoid; the mousey-haired boy he'd had to divert from sitting in the seat he'd been saving for Ginny last night showed up in front of him, a camera in his hands as he looked eagerly at Harry.

"All right, Harry?" he asked, his voice sounding breathless as he took a tentative step towards Harry and raised his camera hopefully. "I'm- I'm Colin Creevey. D'you think- would it be all right if- can I have a picture?"

Looking back at the young boy before him, Harry quickly raced over his options. Say yes and he'd probably never get rid of the kid, say no and he stood a likely chance of leaving the kid devastated; the only option he could think of that satisfied both of them was to act like he'd misunderstood and hope for the best.

"A picture?" he said, looking back at Colin with a slight smile as he stood up. "Sure, feel free; Ron, Hermione? Care to join me?"

For a moment, Ron looked as though he was going to ask what Harry was talking about, but when he saw the slightly pleading look in his friend's eyes, he stood up and positioned himself on one side of Harry as Hermione took up her own position on her brother's opposite side. Colin looked slightly disappointed at first, but he nevertheless took the picture and smiled gratefully at them.

"Thanks, Harry; I *really* wanted to prove I'd met you after everything I've heard," the young boy explained, apparently ignorant of the fact that Harry wasn't entirely interested in known any of this. "I never knew all the odd stuff I could do was magic till I got the letter from Hogwarts- my dad's a milkman, he couldn't believe it either, so I'm taking loads of pictures to send home to him- hey, you couldn't sign this, could you?"

"*Signed photos?*" a new voice said from off to the side, prompting Harry and Hermione to exchange frustrated glances; couldn't Malfoy ever learn not to go where he wasn't wanted (Although if he did that the prat would probably only end up attending Potions and staying in the Slytherin dorm rooms)? "You're giving out *signed photos*, Potter?"

"Tell me, Malfoy," Hermione asked, looking up at him in a mockingly sweet manner, "do you *enjoy* making an idiot out of yourself, or are you just too stupid to care about it?"

"You're just jealous," Colin piped up, despite the fact that his entire body was about as thick as Crabbe's neck.

"*Jealous?*" Malfoy repeated, looking at Harry with a sarcastic smirk. "Of what? I don't want a foul scar right across my head, thanks. I don't think getting your head cut open makes you that special-"

"Actually, it's the *circumstances* of the cutting that make it special," Harry retorted. "If you had *any* kind of brain, you'd at least try and come up with a decent insult; I didn't have anything like *that* happen to my head."

"Might help you out, though," Ron added, smiling teasingly at their mutual nemesis. "I mean, as Harry points out, you don't have *anything* worthwhile up there; maybe if someone *did* cut your head open they'd have a better idea how you survived this long believing all that junk?"

For a moment, Malfoy simply glared scathingly at Ron, but then he smirked slightly as another thought occurred to him.

"Care for a signed photo *yourself*, Weasley?" he asked, looking scathingly over at Ron. "It would probably-"



“What’s all this, what’s all this?” an almost *less* welcome voice said from off to the side. “Who’s been giving out signed photos? Besides me, that is.”

*Oh*, God... Harry groaned as Lockhart came up behind him, chuckling slightly as he slung an arm around the younger boy’s shoulders.

“Shouldn’t have asked!” Lockhart groaned; if Harry had been near a wall, he would have thumped his head against it in frustration. “We meet again, Harry! Come now, Mr Creevey; a double photo- can’t say fairer than that- and we’ll *both* sign it for you!”

Even after the bell rang for the next class- unfortunately *after* Colin had taken the picture-, Harry was unable to get away from Lockhart; the man just set off back to the castle with his arm still around Harry’s shoulders, apparently unconcerned about the glare Harry was shooting in his direction.

“A word to the wise, Harry,” he said as the two of them walked back into the castle and began to head towards the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. “I was trying to cover for you out there. If both of us sign a picture for the lad, it doesn’t look quite so bad; Otherwise, at this stage in your career, handing out autographed photos like that... it looks a bit big-headed you know?”

Harry couldn’t believe he was hearing this; did the man think that *everyone* with a bit of fame wanted to do nothing more than draw attention to themselves? He may have *deliberately* cultivated his fame- the books he’d published were proof of that if nothing else-, but Harry hadn’t done a *thing* to promote the idea that he wanted any more status than he already had.

“Were you even paying attention to what was *happening* out there?” he asked the man in frustration, unconcerned about his attitude; this man hadn’t given Harry any reason to respect him, so he wasn’t going to treat him with any. “I wasn’t signing any photos of me. Colin took a photo of me and my friends and Draco Malfoy tried to make a big deal out of it. I don’t *care* about my ‘fame’; given that my parents *died* when I got this scar, I don’t *really* like to think about it that much.”

“Oh Harry,” Lockhart said with a quiet laugh, patting Harry’s shoulder in a disquietingly familiar manner; had Harry given this man *one reason* to think he liked him? “You are so naïve it’s almost painful. We can only make do with what we are given. You have a scar gained in a most spectacular manner. I have devastatingly good looks, unmatched magical skills, and unquestioned literary talents. It’s all about getting as much as you can with the gifts you have.”

If he hadn’t still been trying to figure out the limits to this man’s abilities- he definitely hadn’t done at least *some* of the things he claimed he’d done, but beyond that Harry couldn’t be sure of anything regarding Lockhart’s magical skills- Harry would have retaliated with his suspicions about this guy’s background; as it was, all he could do was try and reinforce the fact that their backgrounds were *not* the same and see if this prat got the message.

“Those ‘gifts’ you mentioned,” he said, trying to sound casual, “you *do* know that your predecessor was possessed by Voldemort and tried to kill me, right?”

“Harry...” Lockhart said, shrugging dismissively, “into each life a little rain must fall. Do you know how many young witches have tried to break into my flat? Some of them weren’t so *young*, either.” He finished the last sentence with a shudder.

Harry could only stare in bemusement at the professor at that last comment.

Had the guy *really* just said...

*This man is not even speaking the same language I am*, he groaned in frustration. Under *what* circumstances did getting ‘attacked’ by a bunch of witches interested in a quick ‘liaison’ compare to having the most powerful dark wizard for almost three centuries out for your blood?

“I understand if you were feeling a little out of sorts at the bookstore,” Lockhart said in a grand manner, evidently ignorant of Harry’s increasingly strong desire to punch him. “Part of being a celebrity is knowing how to react when life throws these little opportunities our way. I can help you there. And your pull added to mine, throw in all

the cachet of Hogwarts nostalgia and a warm student-teacher bond, and we can make weekly headlines. I wouldn't be surprised if we were invited to functions every weekend until end of term. Wouldn't that be grand?"

Harry blinked bemusedly at that for a moment; did this guy even realise that he was here to *teach* Harry, not parade him around to give *himself* a leg-up?

"I'd have some trouble getting all my homework and revision done if I'm gone all weekend," he said at last; he would have liked to have told Lockhart where he could stick his offer, but, idiot or not, the man was still a teacher, and Harry didn't want to end up with detention any time soon.

"Oh tosh, Harry, I'm talking about something important here!" Lockhart said, hammering the final nail into the coffin of whatever 'respect' Harry might have had for him; this man clearly didn't give a rat's arse about teaching Defence. "I'm talking about our picture on the front page once a week, maybe even twice!"

"You know," Harry replied sarcastically as he tried to gather his wits, while making sure he *didn't* ask the guy if he'd only taken the job for an opportunity to talk to the Boy Who Lived and get further publicity, "it's... 'refreshing' to meet a professor who isn't all hung up on academics."

"The position was mine for the asking, since no one wants to risk that so-called curse," Lockhart replied with a rueful smile; Harry wondered if the man even registered that he was being insulted. Besides, it's not like this is really an important class, is it? Most students will never need to use what they learn in here anyway. Those that do, well, they aren't going to be complaining, now are they?"

If Harry had been just a bit older, he would have punched the man before him in the face in an outrage. People could *die* because he hadn't prepared them properly, and here he was, acting as though it didn't *matter*...

"You don't need to give me an answer now, Harry," Lockhart said with a paternal smile. "Just think about it. We can do great things for each other, great things."

Harry really couldn't *believe* this guy; he *honestly* thought that Harry was interested in being *more* famous? If Lockhart was an example of what fame did to you, he was happy being a nobody, thank you very much.

Admittedly, that last thought wasn't entirely true- he'd *never* be a nobody no matter how much he might want to be- but at least he'd never *deliberately* encourage his status, *especially* not at the expense of others.

As he finally entered the classroom- sitting beside Ron due to a lack of empty spaces beside his sister-, Lockhart took up a position in front of the class, picked up a copy of *Travels with Trolls*, and held it up to show his picture to the entire class.

"Me," he said by way of explanation; Harry was becoming increasingly convinced that this man was missing an entire wall if not a few screws. "Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of *Witch Weekly's* Most Charming Smile Award but I don't talk about that. I didn't get rid of the Bandon Banshee by *smiling* at her!"

Harry wasn't sure what annoyed him more; the fact that the man actually thought a joke like that was funny, or the fact that some people actually *laughed* at it.

"Well then," Lockhart continued, smiling casually around at the class, "I see you've all bought a complete set of my books - well done. I thought we'd start today with a little quiz. Nothing to worry about - just to check how well you've read them, how much you've taken in -"

For a moment, as the paper was placed before him, Harry entertained a brief hope that they might finally have something interesting in class- the books may featured a lot of text that essentially just pandered to Lockhart's ego, but there was still *some* interesting stuff in there- but those fragile hopes were dashed the moment he read the first question.

### 1. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favourite colour?

The later questions did increasingly little to endear the man to Harry; they *all* seemed to be asking the class to recall the stupid *personal* details about Lockhart himself, and nothing about the creatures he'd defeated in the course of his books.

*I mean, honestly; what does it matter what this guy's secret ambition is; it has nothing to do with how he 'defeated' these things!* Harry groaned, wishing he could hit the prat in his vain face without risking a detention. If the man had just included *one* query asking about how he discovered the hag infestation in that village, or how he'd dealt with that werewolf in the Wagga Wagga area (Was that even a real place?), Harry might *just* have been tempted to take the quiz seriously, but as it was, as far as Harry was concerned, there was absolutely no reason to take this quiz seriously, so he wasn't going to bother. Glancing over the questions once more, Harry quickly scribbled down a variety of short answers- ranging from 'Who cares?' to 'So what?' and other such responses- and placed his quill back in the ink container, folding his arms as he stared in frustration up at the ceiling.

Half an hour afterwards- Harry was still finding it hard to believe that anybody was willing to put that much thought into a complete waste of time like this thing-, while Lockhart was commenting on the marks and Harry was desperately trying to tune him out, just when Harry thought he'd experienced the worst that this class was going to offer him, Lockhart announced something that reinforced Harry's desire to hit him somewhere.

"...but Miss Hermione Granger knew my secret ambition is to rid the world of evil and market my own range of hair-care potions!" Lockhart beamed, as he looked up at the class. "Good girl!"

Lockhart continued talking, of course, but Harry wasn't listening after that; he was too busy trying to stop himself from feeling like he was about to throw up.

Hermione was *paying attention* to a comment about *hair-care potions*? The girl who'd never cared what people thought about her appearance, the girl whose enthusiasm for learning had sometimes

worn down even their *teachers* back in primary school, the girl who'd always disliked the very *idea* of careers like modelling where looks counted more than intelligence... was actually *paying attention* to a comment about *hair-care potions*?

If it wasn't for the fact that he'd been with her for almost the entire summer- thus limiting the amount of opportunities something would have had to do anything to her-, and also the fact that he was pretty sure ghosts couldn't actually do that, Harry would have started thinking that she was *possessed* or something equally disturbing.

Actually, no, he took that back; the *really* disturbing part of this whole thing was the fact that Hermione was acting like this by *herself*.

"Now," Lockhart said, breaking into Harry's train of thought, "be warned! It is my job to arm you against the foulest creatures known to wizardkind!"

Harry strongly doubted that the man was really capable of that, but he supposed the final proof of this idiot's claims was in his actions rather than anything else.

"You may find yourselves facing your worst fears in this room," Lockhart continued, "but know only that no harm can befall you whilst I am here; all I ask is that you remain calm."

As Lockhart lifted a large covered cage out from behind his desk, Harry was momentarily intrigued by the potential contents of the cage. Could it be that Lockhart was actually going to show them something that he was capable of dealing with that they couldn't handle yet themselves?

"I must ask you not to scream," Lockhart continued, as he reached up with one hand to remove the covering from the cage. "It might provoke them."

For a moment, there was almost an edge of tension in the classroom at the prospect of what might be inside the cage...

Then the 'professor' removed the blanket over the cage, and Harry instantly reevaluated the man's skills back to his original guess; the man had very little confidence in their talents.

"Yes," Lockhart said, completely missing Harry's incredulous expression. "*Freshly caught Cornish pixies.*"

Harry was saved from the indignity of snorting in amusement when Seamus did it first.

*I mean, come on! he groaned internally. Pixies? Anyone with a half-decent knowledge of magical creatures can deal with that kind of problem, and Hermione and I practically read the book on dealing with these kind of things over the summer!*

Still, he was certainly getting his wish; if Lockhart made as much of a mess of this as Harry hoped he would, then his plan to make Hermione see what an idiot she was being with this... *thing* (He was *not* going to think of it as a crush) she had for Lockhart was going to get encouraged along almost without him needing to do anything.

"Yes?" Lockhart asked, looking critically at Seamus; evidently not even *he* was stupid enough to mistake Seamus's snort for a terrified scream.

"Well, they're not... not very *dangerous*, are they?" Seamus said, evidently trying not to laugh too loudly at the ridiculousness of the sight before him.

"Don't be so sure!" Lockhart said, waving his finger at Seamus. "Devilish tricky little blighters they can be!"

Harry snorted inwardly.

*Yeah right; a bunch of screaming blue midgets who sound like budgies arguing?* He thought to himself, as Lockhart reached over to open the cage. *Let's just see how this guy handles a real situation...*

As soon as the cage had opened, the pixies shot in every direction like rockets. Two of them seized Neville by the ears and lifted him into the air, several shot straight through the window, showering the back

row with broken glass. The rest proceeded to wreck the classroom with the kind of fine detail that would have impressed laser beams, grabbing ink bottles to spray the class with, shredding books and papers, tearing pictures from the walls, up-ending the waste basket, and grabbing bags and books to throw out of the smashed window. It barely took seconds for half the class was sheltering under desks- Neville was even swinging from the iron chandelier in the ceiling-, and, Harry was pleased to note, Lockhart *still* hadn't done *anything* about it.

Harry wasn't being deliberately vindictive, of course; if anyone looked like they were going to get *seriously* hurt, he'd step in and stop it from happening, but right now, with nobody getting hurt and no serious damage being done, he felt comfortable with letting the idiot humiliate himself.

"Come on now," Lockhart shouted, "round them up, round them up, they're only pixies!"

*If they're 'only pixies', how come you haven't dealt with them; you're meant to be teaching us this stuff, remember?* Harry thought, trying to stop himself snorting in laughter at Lockhart's incompetence as the man tried a rather ridiculous-sounding charm- it reminded Harry vaguely of a spell Ron had been allegedly given by Fred and George that he'd tried to demonstrate on their first train-ride to Hogwarts- that only succeeded in drawing attention to his wand and having it yanked out of his hands.

"Ah," Lockhart said, shaking his head slightly before he turned to dash back for his office, glancing back down at Harry, Ron and Hermione where they sat at the front of the class; the rest of the class had already evacuated through the door. "Well, I'll just leave you three to nip the rest of them back into their cage, all right?"

With that, he swept past them and shut the door quickly behind him, leaving the three students to stare incredulously at each other.

"Can you *believe* him?" Ron groaned, as he tried to grab at a nearby pixie only for it to bite him painfully on the ear.



“Oh for crying out- *Immobilus!*” Harry yelled, pulling out his wand and pointing them up at the ceiling, instantly immobilising the still-mobile pixies.

Ron blinked.

“Wait a minute... you could have done that *all the time?*” he said, turning to look incredulously at Harry. “But... but *why?*”

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it?” Hermione said, as she looked back at Ron. “He trusted Lockhart to-”

“Make a complete ass of himself and prove that you’re being a complete idiot?” Harry interjected, as he stood up and begin to grab the now-frozen pixies, subsequently stuffing them back in their cages.

“*What?*” Hermione said, looking incredulously at her brother. “Harry, you don’t know that! Maybe he was just trying to give us some hands-on experience-”

“*Hermione...*” Harry groaned, as he looked critically at his sister, “ the man clearly was having some *serious* trouble helping up put down a bunch of *pixies*, and yet he claims to have handled everything from banshees to werewolves? Am I the *only* one noticing the inconsistencies there?”

“But look at all the things he’s done-” Hermione began.

“Hermione, according to the Dursleys, my biological parents were unemployed wastes of space; just because someone says something doesn’t mean it’s true,” Harry interrupted, staring resolutely at her. “I get that you’ve got this whole thing about respecting people in authority, but you need to realise; sometimes you *can’t trust the adults*, didn’t what happened to me with the Dursleys teach you that?”

As his sister simply continued to stare silently at him, Harry put the pixie he’d just grabbed back in the cage in front of him and walked over to look directly at her.

“Look, Hermione,” he said, as she looked silently back at him, “I get that he *seems* to be good at his job and all that from what you’ve read,

but I just don't think he's being totally honest. I mean, when I was on my way to class, he tried to talk me into making public appearances with him to help his own status; I actually *said* that it would probably cut into my homework time, and all he said was that he was, and I quote, 'talking about something important here! I'm talking about our picture on the front page once a week, maybe even twice!'"

With that said, he stepped back slightly to look more clearly at his sister, the better to ensure that she understood the point he was making.

"I *get* why you want to think he's everything he says he is, Hermione," he said, smiling slightly at her. "And if it was somebody else, I'd be happy for the evidence that you're actually a *girl* underneath all those books," (Hermione was unable to stop a slight giggle at that comment; a couple of Hermione's less-liked aunts had sometimes put some pressure on her to act more feminine, but nobody had ever taken them seriously), "but seriously, the man thinks getting on the front page is more important than marks? He doesn't exactly seem like the kind of person who'd risk his life to take on a werewolf, does he?"

For a moment, there was silence, and then Hermione sighed and lowered her head.

"I was acting a bit like Jade Larkins, wasn't I?" she said, in a small voice, recalling a very appearance-obsessed girl at their primary school (Harry was still not sure how that girl had managed to get away with wearing make-up at their age).

"Nah," he said reassuringly, drawing her towards him again for a brief hug. "You're still better than she is; at least you actually *get* that you were making an ass of yourself."

"Yeah... don't beat yourself up about it, Hermione," Ron added, walking over to pat Hermione reassuringly on the shoulder. "That smarmy git has fooled tons of people, Mum included; she's bought all his books and thinks Dumbledore was lucky to hire him. It's not like you're the only one who fell for his act up until now; don't blame yourself, OK?"

As she looked back at Ron, Hermione, for the first time in Harry's knowledge, didn't chide a friend for using inappropriate language; she just gave Ron a brief, grateful smile and left it at that.

It was only a small victory over the world's biggest git, but so long as his sister was back to normal, Harry was prepared to accept it for the moment.

## Chapter 6 – A Voice in The Wall

After the disaster of the Defence Against the Dark Arts class, coupled with the pre-class ‘conversation’ (If you could call it that, given that Lockhart hadn’t seemed to be listening to what Harry had to say and seemed to have only been paying attention to himself), Harry, Ron and Hermione spent a great deal of time trying to stay out of Lockhart’s way to avoid giving him another chance at ‘convincing’ Harry to help the so-called ‘teacher’ out in his public appearances. Admittedly, Colin Creevey was another one who was rather hard to avoid, but at least Colin was generally satisfied just by saying “All right, Harry?” while passing him in a corridor, even if Harry only replied with “All right, Colin,” regardless of how exasperated he sounded at the time. Unfortunately, Harry’s attempts to avoid Colin resulted in him unintentionally limiting the time he could spend trying to apologise to Ginny for his earlier slip-up, but he was so far unable to find a decent opportunity to talk to her that wouldn’t result in him running into the other first-year boy, and having Colin hanging around him would probably have just resulted in making an already uncomfortable situation even more difficult.

Those little problems aside, however, the first week back at Hogwarts went fairly well, particularly in the classes themselves. Apart from the ever-constant issue of potions- Harry strongly doubted he’d ever manage to achieve good marks in the actual classes, what with Snape’s constantly praising the Slytherins and ignoring the Gryffindors no matter what his students did- in general, Harry swiftly got back into the swing of things, Hermione easily settling back into the routine of school life as well. Admittedly, Ron sometimes had trouble keeping up- he’d come close to nearly hitting Flitwick with a curse when he’d been particularly frustrated after a difficult Charms lesson- but he was still doing fairly well, and Harry was eagerly looking forward to a relaxing weekend as he fell asleep on Friday night.

Then, when he was shaken awake several hours earlier than he would have liked by the familiar form of Oliver Wood, the Gryffindor Quidditch captain, he was forced to acknowledge that a hope like that was never going to happen.

“What the...?” he muttered blearily.

“Quidditch practice!” Wood said. “Come on!”

Blinking as he sat up and pulled on his glasses, Harry felt like hitting something-preferably Wood- when he saw that the world outside the window was still in the early stages of sunrise.

“Oliver...” he groaned as he turned to look at the sixth year, “it’s still barely even morning-”

“Exactly,” Wood replied, grinning at Harry with an enthusiasm that almost seemed to be bordering on madness. “Nobody else has started training yet; we’ll have the advantage over them. Get dressed and hurry up; we’ll be on the field in fifteen minutes.”

With that, he hurried out of the dorm room, leaving Harry to get out of bed and start shrugging on his quidditch robes. As he opened his suitcase to pull on his broom, he noticed his invisibility cloak, and, after a moment’s thought, pulled it out, shrugging it on over himself as he headed for the main common room. If he was going to be doing early training, he wasn’t in the mood to answer questions from a potentially over-enthusiastic Colin attempting to talk to him again. It wasn’t that he disliked the younger boy- he was so enthusiastic that disliking him would have felt like kicking a puppy-, but there were times Harry wished the boy would get over the hero-worship and just see Harry as a person rather than the ‘Boy Who Lived’; having people like Colin practically encouraging his image with all this attention just made it harder for him to try and be treated like a normal student.

Shrugging the cloak over him as he held his broom in one hand, he headed for the portrait hole, sighing slightly in relief as Colin raced past him without even noticing that he was there, clutching what looked like a photograph in his hand as he looked anxiously around himself. After hurrying along a few more corridors, Harry shrugged off the cloak, folded it up, and put it into an inner pocket of his robes; the bulge it created as a result wasn’t large enough to be significantly noticeable unless you were actually looking for it, and the pocket was

deep enough that the cloak should stay quite comfortably in there until he was ready for it.

As he arrived in the changing room at last, Harry was relieved to note that at least he wasn't the only person who felt at least a bit tired; Fred and George looked like they'd only just made it out of bed, Alicia looked like she was ready to fall asleep against the wall, and Angelina and Katie were each yawning side by side. Oliver, however, seemed generally unaware or unconcerned about the condition of his teammates, automatically pulling up a large diagram of a Quidditch field, on which were drawn many lines, arrows, and crosses in different coloured inks, the lines beginning to move around the page after Oliver tapped them with his wand. Harry tried to pay attention, of course- given that his Voldemort-induced coma last year was the main reason they'd lost the Quidditch Cup and come close to losing the house cup, he felt a certain desire to make up for last year's failure-, but it was still so early that his brain only processed around half of what Oliver was talking to him about, and from what he could see it looked like nobody else was really paying that much attention either.

"So," said Wood after a prolonged speech, jerking Harry from a wistful fantasy about what he could be eating for breakfast at this very moment up at the castle. "Is that clear? Any questions?"

"I've got one question, Oliver," George said, looking in frustration at the Keeper. "Why didn't you tell us this when we were awake?"

Oliver groaned.

"Now listen here, you lot," he said, glowering at them all. "We should have won the Quidditch cup last year; we're easily the best team. But unfortunately- owing to circumstances beyond our control-"

He broke off for a moment to look in frustration at the team, prompting Harry to look down at the ground in an attempt to avoid feeling like he was specifically being blamed for that failure- it was hardly his fault that Quirrell had turned out to be possessed by a

homicidal maniac-, before Wood started speaking again, apparently calmed down.

“Anyway,” he said, looking resolutely at the entire team once again, “that’s why we need to train harder than before; let’s get going!”

With that, he seized his broom and marched out of the changing room, the rest of the team following, trying desperately to look more alert than they felt. As he walked out onto the field, Harry was relieved to see that it at least looked brighter outside than it had done earlier- they must have been inside the changing rooms for longer than he thought-, although it was still shrouded in a fine layer of mist. Glancing over at the field, Harry smiled slightly as he saw Hermione and Ron in the stands, munching on the remains of their breakfast as they looked at him.

“Training strategies proving as difficult as ever?” Hermione asked, smiling sympathetically at him from her vantage point.

“Don’t even get me started,” Harry called back, taking another quick glance around as he advanced to the centre of the pitch in case anybody else was watching them; he really didn’t want to have to deal with over-eager ‘fans’ right now. “I get that we want to win this season, but there has to be a rule against wanting it that much...”

Shrugging such thoughts aside as he got onto his broom and flew up into the sky, Harry momentarily allowed his mind to relax as he flew through the air once again, finally back in the air without needing to worry about such details as being seen by nearby muggles or other such inconveniences. He just fly for the few moments between take-off and the moment the balls were released... he could just concentrate on the wind sweeping through his hair... he could just-

“What the hell?!” Oliver’s voice suddenly yelled, forcing Harry out of his brief ‘doze’ and making him glance down to the ground. To his surprise, he saw the Slytherin team walking out onto the pitch, broomsticks in their hands.

“I don’t believe this!” Oliver yelled in outrage. “I booked the pitch for today! We’ll see about this!”

As he shot to the ground, Harry and the others quickly followed him, all seven of them landing in front of their Slytherin counterparts as Oliver glared resolutely at the larger Slytherin captain Marcus Flint.

“Flint!” Oliver yelled at the captain in frustration. “This is our practice time! I booked the field! You can leave now!”

“Can’t do that, Wood,” Flint replied, smirking slightly as he looked at his Gryffindor rival while reaching into his pocket to pull out a small piece of paper. “I’ve got a specially signed note here from Professor Snape. ‘I, Professor S. Snape, give the Slytherin team permission to practice today on the Quidditch field owing to the need to train their new Seeker.’ ”

“You’ve got a new Seeker?” Oliver said, looking in surprise at the Slytherins. “Where?”

As Malfoy stepped forward, clad in the green robes of the Slytherin quidditch team, Harry decided to take back control of the situation.

“God, are you that desperate for attention, Mal-flop?” he groaned, walking forward to look critically at the Slytherin. “I mean, I knew you were jealous of me, but I never thought you’d really go in for the whole ‘imitation is the sincerest form of flattery’ thing to try and get my attention, you prat.”

Malfoy blinked in confusion.

“Excuse me?” he said, looking at Harry as though he’d grown an extra head. “I don’t know what you think you’re talking about, Potter, but-”

“He’s saying you’re trying to get his attention by copying him in the hope that he’ll start hanging out with you and thus you’ll get a rep as being Harry Potter’s mate rather than being an arrogant twit,” Fred



clarified, looking over at Malfoy with a smirk. "Is that simple enough for your tiny brain, or do I need to dumb it down some more for you?"

"How'd you even get on the team?" Harry asked, another thought occurring to him. "It's too early for try-outs to have been held already, and you wouldn't have been allowed to even be a reserve last year- they were bending the rules just letting me on the team-, so... oh," he said, as his eyes fell on the sleek black brooms the team clutched in their hands.

Specifically, brooms that he recognised from the quidditch store in Diagon Alley as being the new Nimbus Two Thousand and One models.

"Ok, you like the brooms?" Flint said carelessly, flicking a speck of dust from the end of his own. "The very latest model; only came out last month I believe it outstrips the old Two Thousand series by a considerable amount. As for the old Cleansweeps-"

Harry didn't even allow him to finish.

He burst out laughing.

"Let me get this straight; you let this useless lump buy his way onto the team?" he said, dropping his broom and clutching his chest as he laughed. "Do you want to lose the tournament or something?"

"What?" Flint said, looking in confusion at Harry before looking back at Oliver. "Is your entire team mental, Wood?"

"No, but you are if you let Malfoy onto the team just because he gave you a speed upgrade," Harry said, managing to calm himself down slightly as he saw Ron and Hermione hurrying towards him out of the corner of his eye. "Didn't you know that Draco's useless on a broom? According to him he's been flying for years, but I outflew him my first time on a broomstick! I mean, he was told that he'd been riding the thing the wrong way for years during our lesson; is a bunch of free brooms really worth forfeiting the next six cups because you've got this prat on the team?"

Malfoy went as red as it was possible for someone with his complexion to go.

“That’s a filthy lie!” he spat, stepping forward as though moving to attack Harry, only to suddenly find two wands pointing in his faces from over Harry’s shoulders.

“Do you want to back that up in court?” Hermione asked in a mockingly polite tone, as she and Ron stood on either side of her brother while she glared at Malfoy. “Because Ron and I were there when it happened- along with pretty much every other Gryffindor in our year- and we can definitely swear that Harry was better than you when the two of you flew against each other.”

Malfoy’s smug look flickered.

“Nobody asked your opinion, you filthy little mudblood,” he said bluntly.

Harry didn’t even stop to think; one minute he was standing between Ron and Hermione, just behind Oliver, his broom in his left hand, and the next he was a few feet forward from where he’d started, and Malfoy was lying on the ground with a bruised cheek and Harry’s hand was throbbing slightly.

Looking down at the other boy, Harry’s eyes narrowed.

“Never,” he stated bluntly. “Call. Her. That. Word. AGAIN.”

Even as Malfoy glared back at Harry, evidently outraged at what had just happened, Harry knew that Malfoy wouldn’t dare to report anything to anybody; it wouldn’t do his ‘anything muggle is inferior’ beliefs any good for it to become even more public knowledge that he’d been taken down by a punch rather than a spell.

“Uh... right then,” Oliver said, blinking slightly at the unexpectedly violent move from his seeker before he looked back at the rest of the

team, "let's just... head down to the lake and stay out of things up here."

As Harry and the rest of the team quickly headed away from the pitch, Harry allowed himself a brief moment to turn back and make a rude gesture in Malfoy's direction before he turned back to look at where he was going. As far as he was concerned, the best victories against Malfoy were the psychological ones; if he made it clear that he didn't see it as being worth his time even to look at Malfoy, the git might get the message and leave him alone.

Of course, Malfoy was probably so desperate for acknowledgement- to say nothing of wanting to be recognised as a credible threat- that he would just take Harry ignoring him as a challenge to push him harder, but Harry had learned enough from his time with the Grangers to know that he'd get nowhere with bullies if he gave them what they wanted.

Getting even with them was all well and good, of course, just so long as they didn't know that you'd gotten back at them...

Harry would definitely have to talk with the twins about getting in some payback on that smug blood-fixated git at some point; maybe something in the field of making him look like the Swamp Thing's relative would be appropriate punishment for the prick...

After the quidditch practice was over, however- they had transfigured some large tree branches to act as makeshift goalposts for practice purposes, although it still wasn't the same as using an actual quidditch pitch-, Harry had put aside any thought of revenge on Malfoy for the moment, and had decided to simply focus on sticking to his original plan for the weekend without worrying about quidditch.

The Slytherin team's new brooms were an issue, of course, but the team had taken Harry's words at the time to heart and decided to ignore the issue; the Slytherins may now possess the speed advantage, but from what they'd seen while training, their essential tactics still seemed to be a case of powering on through the game without even trying to think strategically. So long as they took care to use Slytherin's speed against them in a game- Fred and George's

favoured suggestion was to trick them into pushing themselves so hard that they overshot their targets; the Slytherins' typically bulkier players might make it hard for them to turn when flying-, and Harry was correct about his assessment of Malfoy's quidditch skills, they should be fine.

Right now, however, Harry, Hermione and Ron had only one priority; visit Hagrid and see how things had gone for him since last term. Arriving at their friend's hut after leaving his quidditch robes and broom back in his room, Harry knocked on the door, only be startled when Hagrid opened the door and found a large crossbow in his face as it opened.

"Uh... Hagrid?" Hermione asked, looking uncertainly between the crossbow and their friend at the other end of the weapon. "Is... everything all right?"

"Eh?" Hagrid asked, looking between the three faces before him before he shook his head sheepishly. "Nothin'... just had a bit of a frustratin' visitor earlier..."

"Lockhart, right?" Ron asked, smiling sympathetically at their large friend. "Trust me; we know how you feel."

"What did he want to see you about, Hagrid?" Hermione asked, as the three of them walked into the hut and sat down around the table.

"Givin' me advice on gettin' kelpies out of a well," Hagrid growled, moving a half-plucked rooster off his scrubbed table and setting down the teapot. "Like I don' know that after all these years... an' bangin' on about some banshee he banished. If one word of it was true, I'll eat my kettle."

"I don't blame you; I think he's at least a slight liar myself," Harry said sympathetically as he nodded at his friend. "I mean, he had trouble dealing with a bunch of pixies in our first class, and yet he claims to have dealt with everything from werewolves to banshees? There's something not quite right there, isn't there?"

Hagrid groaned.

“Yeah, I know what yer mean; too bad he was the on’y man available for the job,” the gamekeeper said, as he poured them all cups of tea as he looked in frustration at the rest of them. ““An’ I mean the on’y one. Gettin’ very difficult ter find anyone fer the Dark Arts job. People aren’t too keen ter take it on, see. They’re startin’ ter think it’s jinxed; no one’s lasted long fer a while now.”

“Nobody?” Hermione repeated, looking in surprise at Hagrid. “But you told us that Quirrell had been at Hogwarts for a while...”

“Originally taught Muggle Studies before he took a year off ter get some first-hand experience,” Hagrid clarified. “Last year was his first an’ only year as Defence teacher; one of the latest in a long line of ‘em not to keep the job. If they ain’t sacked or quit, they somehow or other get hurt durin’ class an’ have ter drop out fer so long that invitin’ them back don’t work...”

He shook his head slightly in frustration at the memories. “Pretty much the only reason Dumbledore gave that... twit the job is that nobody else wants it at the moment.”

As Hagrid looked over at Harry, he smiled slightly at the young wizard. “O’ course, I think his main problem with bein’ here is that you’re here too; told ‘im when he visited that you were more famous than ‘im wi’out e’en trying, an’ I think that prompted him ter leave.”

“Well, at least something good came out of this scar,” Harry said, smiling back at his friend with a brief nod. “If it puts that git in his place, I think I can cope with being at least a little famous...”

A few hours later, as Harry walked back to Hogwarts, he allowed himself a slight smile at how well the day had gone despite its disastrous beginning. True, the fact that Malfoy had made it onto the Slytherin Quidditch team wasn’t the best news he’d ever had, but at the same time he’d managed to make it clear to the other team members that Malfoy’s abilities on the court were significantly exaggerated.

Plus, of course, his time in Hagrid's hut had certainly been an enjoyable experience; after spending so long with his classmates- particularly the female ones; Hermione's 'revelation' after the first class apparently hadn't really sunk in to the rest of the group- praising the very ground the man walked on, it was refreshing to see that he wasn't the only person who thought that the guy was overrated.

Right now, though, all he was concerned about was getting back to the dorms and getting to sleep; after waking up as early as he had been today, he'd like to just have a bit of time to rest in case Oliver set up another early practise session tomorrow. Ron and Hermione had decided to stay with Hagrid for a bit longer, but they'd accepted Harry's decision to get to bed early.

Oh yeah... life is good... Harry reflected as he walked back to the room that was already becoming his second home (He hardly counted the Dursleys' house as a home and he could barely remember where he'd lived with his parents). At least there's no sign of mystical objects being hidden in the school this year...

It was only when Harry was half-way to Gryffindor tower that he heard something that made him realise this new year was going to have its own challenges, in the form of a low, hissing voice that seemed to come from all around him as he stood in a corridor.

"Come... come to me... Let me rip you... Let me tear you... Let me kill you..."

Harry blinked.

What the Hell...? he thought, looking around himself for some sign of whoever had spoken. What was that all about?

He couldn't see anyone immediately around him, Invisibility Cloaks were too rare for him to be able to consider that a possible explanation, and while he'd heard about charms that were meant to accomplish pretty much the same thing as the cloak he was fairly certain that they were nowhere near effective enough to make the wearer this invisible...

Besides, even if the speaker was invisible by some means or another, why would they have given the game away by saying something that... creepy... in his presence? Even if they'd given him a specific location to go to, he was hardly likely to want to go off to find somebody who'd been threatening to tear him apart...

Great, Harry groaned, reaching up to clasp his forehead in one hand. I've got another mystery about Hogwarts to crack and the school year's barely even started yet...

Why was it that this school could apparently make it through an entire war without being attacked even once- based on the stories he'd heard about how Voldemort had only ever really feared Dumbledore-, and yet it was now dealing with its second strange occurrence in as many years just after he'd arrived there?

